Uncommon Cause
A Life at Odds with Convention
Volume I
The Formative Years

General George Lee Butler,
United States Air Force, Retired

Illustration by Victor Guiza
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General George Lee Butler, United States Air Force, Retired
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Two roads diverged in a wood and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

*The Road Not Taken*
Robert Frost
For my children, Brett and Lisa,
Who deserve to know their father better

and

For my wife, Dorene,
Who knows me all too well
About the Author

General Lee Butler is retired from careers in military service, business and a public foundation. He and his wife, Dorene, live in Laguna Beach, California. He served from 1991 to 1994 as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Strategic Command and its predecessor organization, Strategic Air Command. In these positions, he was responsible for employment of the nation’s nuclear bombers and land- and sea-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, developing nuclear weapon target plans, and advising the President on responses to nuclear attack on the United States.

Lee’s military career spanned five decades, encompassing a wide variety of command and staff assignments. He is a rated pilot, navigator and parachutist with over 3,000 hours of flying time in a dozen types of aircraft. He was born in 1939 at Fort Benning, Georgia, grew up in an Army family, graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1961, served as an instructor pilot, and then attended the Institut d’Études Politiques, in Paris, France, as an Olmsted Scholar, earning a master’s degree in International Affairs. Following graduation in 1967, he served one year in Vietnam, first in combat as an F-4C pilot and then as aide-de-camp to General George Brown, the theater air war commander, who later became Air Force Chief of Staff, and then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. On returning to the United States, Lee served three years on the faculty of the Political Science Department of the Air Force Academy as an instructor, then as an assistant professor of Political Science. During this period, he also served in the Executive Office of the President of the United States as a special assistant to the Director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness, responsible for helping to manage President Nixon’s 1971-72 Economic Stabilization Program.

His subsequent assignments included 1) flying cargo aircraft, 2) an initial Pentagon tour, 3) an initial tour in Strategic Air Command (SAC), 4) a second Pentagon tour, in the office of the Air Force Chief of Staff, 5) consecutive assignments as commander of SAC heavy bomber wings, 6) a third Pentagon tour, as Director of Air Force Operations, 7) and then Director of Strategic Plans and Policy (J-5) on the Joint Staff.

His early Washington tours included responsibilities for strategic arms
control negotiations, Congressional interaction, weapons systems acquisition and direction of operational forces. While on the Joint Staff, from 1987 to 1991, he was engaged in the historic events leading to the end of the Cold War, serving under Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William J. Crowe and General Colin L. Powell. In January, 1991, he was promoted to his fourth star and named commander of the Air Force’s strategic nuclear forces.

His awards and medals include the Bronze Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, the Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster, and the Distinguished Service Medals of the Air Force and the Department of Defense, as well as awards from the governments of France and Germany.

Lee retired from active military service in 1994. He then joined Peter Kiewit Sons, Inc., a privately-held Fortune 500 company based in Omaha, Nebraska, as President of Kiewit Energy Group, with responsibilities for projects in the United States and South Asia.

Following the divestiture of the Group’s energy holdings in 1998, Lee left Kiewit. Remaining in Omaha, he and his wife Dorene subsequently formed the Second Chance Foundation, a public non-profit entity dedicated to promoting responsible reduction of the residual dangers posed by nuclear weapons in the aftermath of the Cold War. The couple also established the Dorene and Lee Butler Family Foundation to support their philanthropy.

Lee was for many years a director of the George and Carol Olmsted Foundation. He was also a long-time member of the Council on Foreign Relations and served on the United States National Academy of Science’s Committee on International Security and Arms Control, the 1996 Canberra Commission, the 1998 Rumsfeld Commission, and numerous civic boards in Omaha.
Dorene Sue Nunley met Cadet Lee Butler in March of 1961 when he was a senior at the Air Force Academy and she was a junior at Los Angeles State College. They married on August 25, 1962, moved thirty times in thirty-eight years, and finally settled in Laguna Beach, California, in early 2000. Born in San Antonio, Texas, Dorene lived in several towns in Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico before her family moved permanently to Norwalk, California. She worked at Knott’s Berry Farm and Disneyland to finance her studies at California’s Cerritos Junior College and at Los Angeles State College (now California State University Los Angeles).

As a devoted wife and mother, Dorene rose to the challenge of Lee’s frequent reassignments, schools and training programs, relocating time and again to such varied locations as Arizona, Alabama, France, Colorado, California (three times), New York, Texas (three times), Washington, D.C. (four times), and Nebraska (twice).

Dorene has been an active proponent of the military family from her earliest days as an Air Force wife. Later in Lee’s career, she served as a co-facilitator of the coordinating committee for the first Air Force Family Conference and as a member of the landmark Spouse Issues Group that brought family policy to the forefront of Air Force priorities. That achievement led to the establishment of Family Support Centers, now a fixture on Air Force bases. She subsequently served on Secretary of Defense William Perry’s Task Force for Military Family Issues.

Her years of experience as a volunteer honed the skills she brought to two businesses: The Dorene Butler Agency, which engaged speakers and workshop leaders for corporate conventions, and civic and social organizations; and Hospitality America, which offered innovative programs for spouses of conventioneers. Dorene was also employed in public relations for a department store and as a recruiter for an international personnel placement firm.

Her active involvement in the Omaha Community Playhouse during the Butlers’ first Nebraska assignment earned two “Volunteer of the Year” awards. She and her husband were also recognized by the Salvation Army with their “Others” award. She was a trustee at the Joslyn Museum, a member of the
National Military Family Association, active in the Military Impacted Schools Association, and was on the advisory board for the Salvation Army and the Durham Western Heritage Museum. She was Omaha’s representative to “The President’s Summit for America’s Future.” Dorene resumed her active volunteer life in her present hometown of Laguna Beach, California, serving on the boards of the Boys and Girls Club and the Senior Center.

Dorene and Lee have a son, Brett, and a daughter, Lisa. Brett graduated from the University of California Berkeley in 1985, served four years as an officer in the Air Force, and then attended Harvard Business School. He is married to the former Patti Blake. Their blended family includes Madison, Jake, Katie, and Colleen, all out of school and into the real world. Brett began his business career with Procter and Gamble, worked in global product marketing for IDEXX Laboratories, and served for sixteen years in a variety of sales, strategy and marketing positions for the printer company Lexmark International in Lexington, KY. Patti was the driving force behind a family candle-making business, Woodford Wicks, following a career in private and public business. They have now relocated to Northern California where Brett is building a Baptist ministry.

Lisa is a graduate of the University of California Los Angeles and Samuel Merritt Nursing School. Following a stint in the business world, she married fellow Californian Michael Herring, also a UCLA alumnus. Mike has been employed in a number of companies, most recently as an executive vice president of Adobe Systems, and now as chief financial officer for Pandora, Inc., headquartered in Oakland, California. Lisa serves as executive director of the Butler Family Foundation. As a sidebar enterprise, they own The Downstairs Bar, in Park City, Utah, their former home. Lisa and Mike have two sons, Thomas Jackson (T.J., 16) and Theodore (Theo, 14); the family is now living in Orinda, California.
A Special Acknowledgment

Let me be clear at the outset, dear reader, as to my wife’s role in the writing of this retrospective. I have ascribed to her the title, “A Wife for All Seasons,” with a bow to Robert Whittington’s timeless tribute to Sir Thomas More, a man of unimpeachable integrity who remained true to himself through every trial. Dorene’s irreplaceable role in my life, her gentle but unyielding insistence that I undertake this memoir, and her invaluable contribution to these pages have given me the constancy of purpose to persevere, in my life and in the ten years invested in the book you hold. Dating from the afternoon of August 25th, 1962, she has lived every event, every joy, sorrow, triumph and tragedy recorded herein, either physically present or emotionally bonded to the consequences. She carried on through so many lonely days and nights, raising two children while covering for their mostly absent father, away to war or engulfed by work. She shepherded them through ten schools and two dozen moves while never wavering in her vow to me: to have and to hold, in good times and bad. She made our marriage a partnership from the moment my wedding vow echoed hers, even when my contribution was woefully wanting. But, through it all, whether together or apart, we have been inseparable, never far from each other’s thoughts, ever in each other’s hearts.

As you will come to understand, she was as much in service to her country as was I, making her mark in every assignment and on everyone privileged to be in her company. More important, her sacrifice far exceeded mine, not only making my dreams her own, but quietly carrying many of the burdens that came with the pursuit of my aspirations. While no military spouse is a stranger to these demands, in Dorene’s case the unique unfolding of my career; the historic circumstances that intruded time and again in our lives; my narrow escapes from death; and, as the title suggests, my penchant for swimming against the prevailing tides in tour after tour placed unique cares and responsibilities on her shoulders. And yet, she not only coped but left every venue better than she found it, every person she touched better for having known her. This is very much her story, as well it should be; here is the true public servant in the Butler family.
Other Acknowledgments

My labors benefited greatly from the service of a host of devoted and skilled readers. Having elected to self-publish a lengthy memoir that is also largely self-written (two chapters are co-authored) I am very much indebted to the extraordinary array of friends I enlisted to check me on three vital measures: accuracy, tone and appropriateness. Several went well beyond the call of that duty, taking virtual ownership of the manuscript. Their attention to the minutest details of grammar and construction, while preserving my writing voice, saved me from any number of missteps that would have earned a severe dressing down from my Oakland, Mississippi, English teacher, Mrs. Ruth Criss, whom I shall introduce shortly. Most notably, I must register my profound appreciation to Air Force Academy classmate, roommate, Rhodes Scholar and very tough grader John Sullivan; Ted Warner, whom I first met during service on the Air Force Academy faculty and who co-authored Chapter 17; Frank Miller, who epitomizes the role of public servant and co-authored Chapter 23; my brother, Bill, a true intellect and disciplined thinker; classmate and skilled historian Hector Negroni; Art Kerr, whose sharp eye caught even the smallest error; Jerry Martin, historian for the United States Strategic Command, and his erudite deputy, Dan Harrington; and, last but not least, Larry Kutcher, my computer expert, an intellectual soul mate, and valued companion. My earliest encouragement beyond family came from two of the most cultured and learned colleagues I have been privileged to know, both of whom relentlessly prodded me not only to write but to publish: the late Jonathan Schell, whose pen set the bar for excellence in the global campaign to reduce nuclear dangers, and Emilio Tavernise, a modern-day Renaissance Man. Their confidence was echoed by retired Brigadier General Don Pettit, one of my most trusted colleagues, and Brice Jones, Bill Griffis, and Charlie Stebbins, all lifelong friends from the Air Force Academy Class of 1961.

I later called on retired four-star Walt Kross, whose intellectual depths have never been plumbed; retired three-star Erv Rokke, former Dean of Faculty of the Air Force Academy and Defense Attaché to the Soviet Union; longtime friend and Rhodes Scholar Dick Klass; a sharp-eyed and beloved former secretary, Lil Schatz; retired two-star Perry Smith, an early mentor; several four-star
colleagues who did invaluable service in fleshing out and fact-checking particularly cogent portions of the narrative; and Ward Wilson, whose recent book *Five Myths About Nuclear Weapons* laid bare misconceptions about the role and utility of these devices that the reader will find square perfectly with my own assessment.

The endorsement of these respected colleagues prompted me to engage other close friends with little if any background regarding military life. The first was Dorene’s dearest companion for many of her early years, Elaine Abrams, a brilliant psychotherapist who has just published her own memoir; second, our neighbor, Kelly Mazzo, whom Dorene and I have practically adopted; third, a Laguna Beach friend, Chris Quilter, read the narrative with a skilled writer’s eye; and Judy and Jim Onak, Dorene’s beloved niece and her husband. Several others made valuable contributions, including classmates Stu Boyd; Bobbie Grace; Randy Cubero, former dean of the Air Force Academy; and Tom Eller. I must thank Colonel Tom Drohan, head of the Air Force Academy Department of Military and Strategic Studies, and his talented staff. I must also record my profound thanks to two other four-star colleagues: Steve Lorenz, a dear friend of many years standing; and Butch Viccellio, who bears a special accolade for his expert eye and thoughtful advice. He grasped perfectly my intent in this memoir, read it from just the right perspective, and honed the final manuscript to a fine edge.

The publishing world was a revelation unto itself. I was unschooled in the array of skills required to convert a manuscript into a book worthy of offering to the public. On that score, I was supremely well served by my Outskirts Press team of Tanya Salgado, principal consultant; Lisa Connor, who initially judged my musings fit for print; Cheri Breeding, illustrator facilitator; Elaine Simpson, author representative; Steve Fortosis, copy editor; Victor Guiza, cover artist; Barbara Crain, interior designer; and Wendy Stetina, Director of Production. They did a great deal of handholding with a new author who has a newfound appreciation for the publishing business.

In closing, I want to register my love for our children, Brett and Lisa, who have brought Dorene and me so much joy and pride. I really did not deserve them, could not imagine my life without them, and am forever indebted to them for their boundless tolerance of my shortcomings, graceful recognition of my better qualities, giving me a clear purpose in writing, and most importantly, their unconditional love.
Foreword

This retrospective is divided into two volumes encompassing three parts, each of the latter covering distinct phases of my maturation from the middle child of an Army family, to a career military officer, to an ardent proponent of eliminating reliance on nuclear weapons – including the very arsenal for which I was responsible in my last assignment: commander of the United States Strategic Command. The first part covers my 43 years as an apprentice, from birth in 1939 through 1982, preparing for the second phase of my life as an executive, a period that included command of two major Air Force combat flying outfits, a decade as a general officer, and, following my military retirement, the presidency of a fledgling company, an initiative that ended in 1999. The third part relates my transition from businessman to my present life as a humanist, deeply engaged with the classic issues of human interaction. While I considered publishing each of these accounts separately, for distinctly different audiences, the individual narratives proved too closely related. My persona, rather closed and iconoclastic, was shaped by life in rural Mississippi, by family relationships, and by peripatetic travels as an Army brat. That withdrawn contrarianism predisposed my response to society, the military culture, marriage, and ultimately, the other-world destructiveness of the devices that have been my preoccupation for nearly forty years.

That said, it is hardly my expectation that every reader will hang on every word of both volumes; some chapters may well be of more interest than others because of a personal history either with Dorene and me or with the particular record of events. For those souls who set out to stay the entire course, permit me to say with some immodesty that a second motive for weaving these three parts into whole cloth was the enthusiasm with which a score of readers responded after perusing the manuscript front to back. That dedication gave me comfort as to the appeal of its leading character and confidence as a first-time author who now offers his retrospective to a wider audience.
And so, dear reader, my hope is that you will begin your sampling with Chapter One and then I will be happy to let our engagement proceed as your sympathies so incline.

Lee Butler
Laguna Beach, CA
Summer, 2015
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PART ONE:

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Apprentice
In undertaking this long look back, I accepted that an honest accounting demanded uncompromising self-assessment from first page to last and I have been faithful to that vow. This proved for me the most illuminating reward of this decade-long undertaking. Although I have always been clear about what I stand for, I had never reflected at any length on the instincts and values that influenced my personality and character. That understanding began in earnest in 2001 when I retired from public life and committed to building more intimate relationships with my family, acquiring new skills and managing a difficult relocation from Omaha to Laguna Beach. This period of concentrated reflection, abetted by the task at hand, triggered a personal transformation now largely complete save for a couple of deeply rooted traits that are frustratingly difficult to eradicate.

I also had to deal with a motive for putting my life’s record on paper. Many friends, colleagues, and as noted, no one more so than my wife, have urged me to create this journal, but a mix of modesty, appreciation for the task and reservation about its worth gave me pause. Initially, I concluded that there was at least one appropriate audience: my children. They deserved to know their father better than my career and my nature permitted during their formative years and much of their adult life. With that in mind, I set out to write a family history, one that chronicled not just my narrative, but also captured for our grandchildren and their children the story of how our collective lives unfolded, replete with our most treasured stories and most difficult challenges.

Once a first draft was in hand, I shared it with a small circle of friends beyond immediate family in order to check my memory of various events for which my files and various research sources were not helpful. To a person, they encouraged me to expand its scope for a wider audience, not only of people who had been close to us over the years, but also for the chapters that dealt with significant historical events in which I had played a leading or key supporting role. That was particularly the case with respect to the transformation
of the nation’s strategic nuclear forces and my responsibilities as the Director of Strategic Plans and Policy during the first sixteen months of General Colin Powell’s tenure as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when we collaborated in recasting the nation’s military strategy and organization.

After long reflection, and reading more deeply into the history of Powell’s chairmanship and my term as commander of the strategic nuclear forces, I became persuaded that I had unique knowledge of critical aspects of this period that historians and other serious readers would find useful, and marked by drama that would engage a broad lay audience as well. Hence, I revisited this era with a keener eye for the detail that would do greater justice to the record and the human elements that would pay proper due to the remarkable professionalism and sacrifices of the large cast of players involved.

That proved far more demanding than I had envisioned, eventually turning this into a ten-year project and a manuscript that was far too lengthy for most readers. Many of the family anecdotes and other stories originally included would have been meaningful only to the closest of friends who so enriched the Butler family journey. Consequently, I decided to share that broader narrative only with those who would feel most connected to it and to record here just the stories that best illuminate who we are as a family, the qualities of my wife and children that bring me such joy, and who I came to be personally and professionally.

Some of the lessons I took from this retrospective are acutely painful; the most telling arise from reflection on my role as a husband and a father. Whatever the value of my contributions to the nation, the associated demands, exacerbated by my insular personality, took a heavy toll on both me and my family. While my military career was subject to an unbroken chain of unique and extraordinary circumstances, and my nature was forged during a childhood that imposed severe limits on my capacity for intimate relationships, that neither excuses nor assuages my regret for my deficiencies as a spouse and as a father. I missed too many opportunities, tangible and emotional, to participate in my children’s upbringing, and it took years for me to understand my wife’s needs. The most gratifying aspect of my growth in familial roles has been recognizing and largely mitigating these shortcomings. In the process, I have become a better person, a more loving husband, father and grandfather, a caring son and brother, and a tolerable friend.

Finally, a word with respect to the title, the stage setter for the ensuing narrative. *Uncommon Cause: A Life at Odds with Convention* is the most cryptic description I could devise of a life defined by choices that were unpopular, controversial and fraught with risk for my career, my family and my emotional
and physical well-being. Certainly nothing in my childhood, or my persona, prepared me for a life of taking up causes many found ill-advised, doomed, or downright bizarre. I was raised in a family largely devoid of overt affection and spent a number of my younger years in a tiny, inward-looking, and banally racist Southern town. I became increasingly shy and withdrawn in the course of constant uprooting, was short and slight with painfully youthful features, making me unsuited for contact sports and uncomfortable with dating. I had no grounding sense of purpose or place.

The theme of the opening section, *Apprentice*, lies in the challenges and the opportunities that drove me to overcome these limitations by drawing on an inner strength that oddly sprang from the same family and core community that otherwise so circumscribed my early character and confidence. Here, then, is where my story begins – with the Butlers, the Jacksons, and my life as a country boy in and around a nondescript little town in the heart of the rural South.
Chapter 2

Country Boy

Permit me, dear reader, to delay for a bit introducing the unexceptional circumstances of my birth in June of 1939 and turn first to Oakland, Mississippi, which I regarded as my hometown for the first twenty-five years of my life. It sits at the crossroads of state highways 51 and 32, the former running north and south from Memphis down to Jackson and the latter east and west from Charleston to Coffeeville. In the 1950s, it was also a station on the north-south rail line, where freight trains stopped to take on water and goods. Each afternoon at 4:30, the “City of New Orleans” train roared non-stop through the station, whistle blaring, treating the local kids to its daily ritual of snatching the mail pouch from a track-side harness.

The town had a cotton gin and a sawmill, one main street, which had the distinction of being paved, and an assortment of stores, ranging from Wells Drug Store on the north end to the “colored café” on the south. Mr. T.G. Wells ran his enterprise with an iron fist, cigar clamped between his teeth, forever berating his grown son who suffered from a speech impediment and was relegated to working the soda fountain. Next down was Bell’s Dry Goods, then a movie theater housed in a former gas station, followed by Mr. James Calloway’s Bank of Oakland, a grocery store, lumber yard and finally the café.

Public safety was looked after by my Great Uncle Grover Johnson, who also served as the town water bill collector, fire marshal, handyman, and rumor had it, distributor for the local moonshine concession. He and my Great Aunt, Lillian, whom we all called “Sister,” lived in a modest wood frame house on the far west side of Oakland, far meaning about a half-mile from the center of town. That six-room structure was the closest thing to home for me and my older sister, Anne, throughout our youth, as it had been for my mother, who was born in Oxford, Mississippi. Aunt Sister and Uncle Grover had raised her from infancy, as her mother Kate, who had fallen ill shortly after giving birth, did not feel capable of raising her in addition to her older brother. Kate, who was married to one of Sister’s brothers, an itinerant newspaper man, asked
Country Boy

Sister to take her daughter in, and thereafter showed scant concern for her welfare. Some years later she tried to regain custody but, happily, was unsuccessful, as her daughter had by then tightly bonded with her surrogate parents.

To this day I am puzzled about my aunt and uncle’s relationship, as I cannot imagine two people more unlike. They did not sleep together; in fact, they were rarely in each other’s company. Grover was gruff, short-spoken, snore-kicked many of his waking hours, smoked foul unfiltered cigarettes, and lived in a back corner bedroom where he kept his revolver, cased in its holster, hung on the footboard of his bed. He arrived home every evening around sunset, toting a treat for Anne and me, usually Twinkies or a pint of vanilla ice cream, as we sat on the long steps fronting the house. These were handed off with a grunt, whereupon he repaired to his bed and spent much of the night smoking and reading cheap detective novels. The bed covers were dotted with cigarette burns, and the room reeked of nicotine. I found him utterly fascinating.

Sister occupied the southwest room, where she led a genteel Christian life, read voraciously, and penned her voluminous correspondence. She read *National Geographic* each month cover to cover and saved stack upon stack of these treasured journals in the garage. A wholly endearing person in every regard, she was intelligent, centered and comfortable with her life. Sister was unfailingly calm, pleasant and kind. I loved being in her company, planting flowers with her beside the sweeping front lawn, or swinging quietly on the front porch, listening to her parse the day’s news stories, her black cocker spaniel, Happy, by her side. She is the central figure in my younger years, and I carry her spirit with me to this day. Her influence on my values, personality and intellectual curiosity was determining in every respect. I am very much her child.

The Oakland homestead was our perennial retreat when my father, a career Army man, was sent on unaccompanied tours of duty. Thus it was that I attended first grade, fourth grade, part of the seventh grade, and the ninth and tenth grades in the local all-white school. Miss Mary Smith was my first-grade teacher, a role she filled for my mother, sister and brother Bill as well. We all began our education in her classroom, sitting in the same little red chair. Miss Smith was pure sweetness, made school a joy and was a credit to her profession.

Daily life in Oakland followed the seasons, farming being the center of life for the town and its environs. The beginning and the ending of the school year were tied to the cycle of planting and harvesting corn and cotton. Morale hung on the weather, the size of the harvest and the fortunes of the football team, the Oakland Hornets. Five churches provided spiritual comfort to the faithful: Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Church of Christ and the nondenominational black church. Life was mostly plain, simple and predictable, at least in its seasons and rituals.
Change was frightening and unwelcome, and no small effort was spent keeping the world at bay. The town’s most powerful resident, Mr. Walter Moore, Sr., was also the self-appointed guardian of all that was right, holy and acceptable. His wealth and fearsome personality kept the citizenry in bounds and the barbarians from the gates. According to my mother, his refusal to allow meaningful growth in the town’s economic life was largely responsible for Oakland’s decline, bringing ruination to a considerable segment of the population.

Of course, I was mostly unaware of this canvas on which my own life was also being painted. Its broad outlines were dictated by the march of the local calendar and customs. I attended school, church, and summer revivals faithfully, played football and baseball poorly, carried the newspaper diligently, raised a Black Angus calf reluctantly, rode my own horse cautiously, and played with a handful of friends happily. With an absentee Army father, a caring but unaffectionate mother, a precocious and beautiful older sister and a brilliant but much younger brother, I grew up the middle child left largely to his own devices. I spent a lot of time with my own thoughts, fearing God and His wrath, wishing I were taller and stronger, worrying about class work and tests, and wondering how babies were made.

God, predominantly in his Jesus persona, was at the core of my daily existence. I seemed to be forever going to church, for Sunday service, for Tuesday Bible study, or to help keep the grounds clean. My great-grandfather was a Church of Christ minister. I inherited from him a promising intellect, a fierce bent toward independent thinking, a knack for writing and a call to follow in his footsteps. I was baptized on the 4th of July, 1954, just down the road in Charleston, because the Oakland church lacked a facility to accommodate total immersion. It was a scorching hot day, and the preacher was in full throat. What I mostly remember about the event was that he held me underwater for a very long time, while running on about God’s glory and Christ’s sacrifice, which I felt sure I was about to share. What strikes me in retrospect was my fervor in renouncing alcohol, women and all forms of sin, none of which I had yet meaningfully experienced.

My segregated schooling took place in a single, large red brick building that housed grades one through twelve. I had twenty-two classmates, most of them tough farm kids who worked like Trojans year-round. They took in stride my periodic two-year absences, and socially I always fell back in step with them without a hitch. To this day I remember them fondly and some still stay in touch despite the fact that our lives have unfolded in sharply divergent directions. My academic life was another matter entirely; I was invariably behind my peers elsewhere because the Mississippi curriculum was geared to a different educational
climate. The usual core courses were taught in a different order, subjects like biology and foreign languages were too esoteric, and the vocational studies of Home Economics and Agriculture were mandatory.

That said, my teachers were dedicated and competent. Mrs. Criss, who taught English with a humorless, piercing intensity, had a defining influence on my life. She brooked no excuses, cut no slack, assigned books impossible to read and sentences impossible to diagram. She graded every paper meticulously, with every error noted and corrected. I mastered English fundamentals, deepened my inherited love of well-crafted writing, and began to develop the intellectual discipline that marked my career and, on more than one occasion, saved my life. She also taught me my first lesson about integrity after catching me in the act of correcting an English assignment for one of my less adept classmates. The disappointment in her eyes was palpable and her stern reprimand cut me to the quick. “Lee,” she said, “you are not helping George by masking his lack of ability, nor yourself by passing off your work as his. How can I then help him or ever again trust you?” The lifelong value of that deeply painful episode will become increasingly clear as this memoir unfolds.

As an athlete I was something between amusing and pathetic. I escaped having to play football in the ninth grade because I had a mouthful of very expensive braces. That excuse lapsed once my malocclusion was realigned, and as a 97-pound tenth grader, I became a third-string halfback and defensive back. I was third string because we had thirty-three boys in grades nine through twelve, a number evenly divisible by eleven. Had there been forty-four boys, I would surely have been on the fourth string.

I hated playing football. None of my equipment fit. My shoes were at least one size too large. My weight in the program was listed as 100 pounds because coach Red Dog Mason refused to advertise that he had a player who weighed less than three digits. Practice during a Mississippi summer was miserable and painful. No amount of grit could overcome my physical limitations. Every play was an exercise in survival. The line averaged well over 200 pounds, most players other than me were tough, mean and fast, and if armed with a whip the coach would have qualified as a sadist.

On the dusty field behind the school, my football career had its high and low points on the same night. Midway through the third quarter, I was playing defensive back when a tipped pass fell directly into my hands. While contemplating how to handle this turn of fortune, the opposing tight end who had created it descended on me like a falling elevator. After I regained consciousness, I learned I had held on to the ball and been carried off the field with it still cradled in my arms.
My hero status was short lived. With the game comfortably in hand, and in tribute to my sudden defensive prowess, Coach Mason inserted me into the game at halfback with the ball on the opponent’s five-yard line and our offense owning a first down. The quarterback called on me for an off-tackle play, which I began well before the snap. The whistle blew, the five-yard penalty for backfield in motion was assessed, and the same play was called. I again launched early; we were moved back to the fifteen-yard line, where, like a badly programmed robot, I jumped the count a third time. With the team now staring at a fourth and goal, time blessedly expired, ending the game, the season and my career in football. Sic Transit Gloria.

But playing football had an upside: it taught me to persevere. In a small country school, quitting is not an option, so I just had to take the misery and the pain. That one quality, reinforced by two childhood responsibilities that ran in parallel with football and rivaled it for sheer drudgery, would later emerge as the single most important factor that enabled me to survive the personal and professional crises that came to punctuate my life.

The first of these responsibilities was carrying the morning newspaper, the Memphis Commercial Appeal. I was pressed into this service by a fast-talking local distributor who made the job sound easy and lucrative. On the surface, it seemed a good deal, promising $40 a month for a couple of hours of morning work before school. Wrong. The daily reality proved far more challenging. I am not a morning person, but there I was up at 4:30 a.m., on my bike by 5:00, riding the mile to the 51-32 Café to pick up my 75 papers, and spending the next two hours delivering them over eight miles of dusty country gravel roads, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, in sunshine, darkness, rain, sleet or snow. Sunday was a special nightmare. The paper was so thick and heavy that I had to shuttle back and forth to the café because my basket, though large, would hold only a third of the bulky Sunday papers at once.

My customers, who comprised the entire white population and one black-owned store, ran the gamut from wealthy to deadbeats, appreciative to demanding, kindly to menacing. Collecting the monthly bill required considerable diplomacy and invoked a lot of stress. I had a fiscal duty to the route boss, who wanted his costs covered promptly on the first day of the month. Everything beyond that represented my profit, which I quickly learned might or might not add up to $40, depending on my success in getting customers to pay up. I still have my collection ledger, with its careful annotations of who owed what and for how long. To this day I can see myself mounting the steps of some creaky porch and rapping on some scruffy door, stomach churning as I anticipated another confrontation or pathetic excuse.
I put myself through this ordeal for two years during my ninth and tenth grade years, at one point adding for a time the afternoon paper to my delivery responsibilities. I persevered, with no small help from my mother who fed me breakfast, took me in the car when the weather was too foul for the bike, and patched me up after periodic wipe-outs. It made me stronger, tougher, more of a loner given the long solo hours on my bike, and modestly affluent, at least until I was required to take on a second burdensome responsibility.

Although we lived for several years in Uncle Grover and Aunt Sister’s home, in 1953 my father left for Korea, and we moved to a small house up the road from them that had been built many years earlier by Uncle Grover to shelter Kate and her husband, Lee Jackson, Aunt Sister’s brother. That house, small and bare bones, sat on five acres of land, much of which was overrun by nature but still accommodated a bit of pasture where I kept my horse, a sway-back mare with a ton of attitude named Blue, for the odd cast to his coat. As I began the tenth grade, and my second year of Agriculture class, I had to take on a project related to farm life and to earn a passing grade, turn in a profit. With no farming skills, raising a crop wasn’t practical, so for reasons I can neither recall nor fathom, I elected to raise a Black Angus calf. Big mistake.

From the moment the beast arrived on the premises it was nothing but trouble: unruly, loud, demanding and expensive – feeding it ate up every dime of profit from my paper route. I despised the animal, resented every morsel that went down its throat, and would gladly have slaughtered it absent the requirement to sell it at the end of the year. It did not get along with Blue, or with any other creature for that matter, including my mother. One of my most vivid memories from this chapter of my life was returning from football practice one dark night late in the year and, as I approached the house, being nearly bowled over by some manic, invisible force tearing pell-mell in the opposite direction. The source of the mystery was revealed when I saw my mother materialize out of the darkness, dressed in her nightgown, shouting, “Come back here, you damn calf!”

My antipathy for the bovine species only deepened after another unhappy turn of events precipitated by the immutable link between an Oakland education and the life agricultural. I was railroaded into the Oakland chapter of the Future Farmers of America and installed as its parliamentarian, a duty which had some residual value. However, my FFA participation also led to my involuntary participation in the annual ritual of selecting Oakland’s representative to the Mississippi State Dairy Cattle Judging Contest held in Jackson, an adventure which only served to leave a lasting scar of humiliation.

One stifling afternoon, Mr. Criss, my Agriculture teacher, piled all twenty-one
boys into a bus and hauled us to a nearby barn where were assembled a motley collection of five dairy cows. Our task was to evaluate and rank order them according to a set of criteria not made evident to me. By this hour of the day, the barn was foul, hot and airless. After one whiff of the putrid chamber, I made a bee line back to the bus, took out my score sheet, and wrote down the numbers one through five in a completely random order and gave it to Mr. Criss. Incredibly, that clueless ranking turned out to be the precise and only winning sequence submitted, earning me the honor of Oakland judging champion and a trip to the state capital.

Matters in Jackson were entirely different. The judging entailed dozens of cows and went on from dawn to dusk. The criteria were set forth very explicitly, to include the baffling item, “udder pliability.” I was completely at sea, finishing dead last among the dozens of competitors. Fortunately, on my return to Oakland, no one seemed to care about the outcome. This experience stayed with me for years. It was the first time I had felt the acute distress of being caught up in events well over my head and beyond my control. It would not be the last.

To football, newspapers and cows, I would have to add guns as leaving a lasting impression from my Oakland years. During one of the brief intervals when he was back in town between assignments, my father tried to teach me something about hunting, beginning with mastering a .22 rifle during backyard target practice with cans and bottles. Our one foray into the field together was awful, the low point coming when my father insisted that I fire his 12-gauge shotgun. I was unprepared for the recoil, which knocked me flat on my butt and bruised the be-Jesus out of my shoulder. He found that hilarious, as did his hunting buddies, but I felt embarrassed and incompetent.

He also taught me the rudiments of how to care for the Colt .45 he left with my mother for protection as he departed for a year-long tour in Korea. By chance, his brother Jack, who lived in Memphis, dropped in for a visit just as my father phoned from San Francisco, his port of departure. While he and mother talked, I got the urge to show Uncle Jack my prowess in handling the .45, which I had never actually fired. I did remember to remove the ammunition clip but forgot to clear the chamber. While my uncle, who hated guns, watched with some trepidation, I casually raised the barrel, pointed roughly toward the center of the dining room wall and pulled the trigger. The gun fired with a deafening explosion, acrid smoke filling the room. I was scared to death. The bullet made a small hole in the wallpaper, tore a board off the outside wall and hit my uncle’s car parked in the driveway. Mother did a remarkable job of keeping her cool and covering for me, telling my father that Jack was visiting and had dropped something in the kitchen.
Ultimately, when my father returned in the spring of 1955 with orders to the Pentagon, the calf was sold, my paper boy days ended, and a new chapter in my life opened. I was not eager to leave Oakland, because for all its faults it was home. My prowess as a student, paper boy and nascent preacher outweighed my lack of talent on the ball field and in the dairy barn. I was decent, friendly, well liked, and had developed powerful qualities of Christian faith, discipline and perseverance.

Conversely, I ultimately came to understand that for all the years I grew up there, Oakland was a typical Southern bastion of racism, and during those early years I was imbued with that prejudice. My little hometown probably harbored a thousand or more people, but only the 500 white folk were acknowledged on the incorporation sign at the town limits. Blacks lived in shanties, drank from separate water fountains marked “Colored,” and had their own churches, schools and social life. They worked in white folk’s homes or in their fields, and were generally referred to as “niggers,” regardless of age, sex or occupation. They were expected to know and stay in their place, on penalty of verbal humiliation, physical abuse or, in some parts of the state, violent death. I lived at moral ease with this despicable reality well into my teenage years.

Daily life in Oakland revealed both the evil and the banality of racism. Otherwise decent white people, God-fearing and church-going, would never imagine there was anything morally wrong, much less wicked, about their attitudes or behavior toward blacks. They regarded them as ignorant souls who had a place in southern economic life, and who should be cared for much like physical property. Although genuine affection between whites and blacks was not unusual, especially where household tasks were involved, such as caring for children, there was always a clear line of cultural demarcation that could be crossed only at great peril, as least so far as the “help” was concerned. If a white man wanted to have his way with a “colored girl,” that was his privilege. But God help the black man who dared even look “inappropriately” at a white woman.

Living in a place so racially, culturally, economically and spiritually divided left a deep imprint that stayed with me into early adulthood. While I have some pleasant childhood memories of family, friends and community, my environment was morally abhorrent; it reinforced my introverted nature, warped my values and constrained my ambitions. But, if nothing else, on a bright spring morning in 1955 it produced a moment that determined the course of my life. One of my daily chores was to retrieve the mail from our box at the Post Office, a sturdy red brick building across Highway 32 opposite Wells’ Drug Store. I made it a habit to read the various bills, notices and postings that covered its walls, especially the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list. On this particular day, a bright new poster
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adorned the east wall. It portrayed a stalwart young man in a blue uniform saluting the American flag as three jet aircraft flew overhead. The caption issued the invitation, “Come to the United States Air Force Academy.” I studied the poster intently, then fetched the mail and was on my way, an intriguing image tucked away in the back of my mind. A year later it would spontaneously surface and spark an impromptu decision that took me on a 37-year journey.
If lineage plays any part in predicting success in life, mine was entirely problematic. My father Grady’s family was beset with tragedy – his father a railroad man who suffered mightily at the company’s hand, in body and soul, and his mother a long suffering, gentle lady who bore a relentless succession of traumas. The Butlers lived in Grenada, Mississippi, some twenty miles south of Oakland, moving there from Alabama where Grady had been born. They had six surviving children, having lost a daughter in childbirth and a son at six months. The rest all suffered to one degree or another from unrequited ambitions and expectations. Mack, the oldest and favorite, became an Army Air Corps aviator, but was killed in World War II, a loss from which the family never recovered. The next oldest, my father, dropped out of college in the Depression and joined the Army as a private in the horse cavalry. Jack, the next, was movie star handsome, immensely talented and ridden with guilt, killing himself with rat poison. His body, frozen in agony, was discovered by my father. Next came Eddy, a lost soul who died an alcoholic. Daughter Lilly had a marvelous singing voice, but struck me as self-centered and drawn to money and position, which was supplied by a modestly well-to-do husband. Finally, daughter Georgia was widely traveled, divorced, withdrawn, long suffering and bitterly paranoid. When I was forty years old, she sent me a letter accusing my parents of turning me against her, and demanding that I choose between them and her.

We spent considerable time in Grenada with my grandparents, and I recall a number of Thanksgiving and Christmas meals around a crowded table presided over by Grandfather Butler. He never said much except to signal for this or that platter of food. He had a well-equipped woodworking shop in the back yard where I gathered he spent much of his time. My father must have learned his own skills as a carpenter from his father, although I can’t remember ever seeing the two of them together. Indeed, I can recall no visible expressions of affection on my grandfather’s part. My image of him is that of a patriarch presiding over the recurring holiday meals that brought the family back to hearth
and home. I never met Mack, of course, but knew that the family had doted on him, as they did Mack, Jr., his smart, athletic and popular son who died in his teens from brain cancer. Grandmother Butler seemed an infinitely sad woman, not surprising in light of her circumstances. In my mind’s eye, I can still see her gazing forlornly out the window, sagging under the weight of too many misfortunes.

I have tried to understand Grady as a product of this environment in order to better appreciate his own shortcomings as a father which, at least from my perspective, were considerable and hard to forgive. The fact that he was an Army man and frequently gone from the family for extensive periods made his parental role difficult in any event. But, even when he was with us, he took little interest in me or, from what I could see, in my brother, Bill. Conversely, he was smitten with my sister, Anne, who held him in thrall with her beauty, intellect and vivacious personality. For my part, I lived in constant anxiety in his presence. A perfectionist of sorts, he was given to outbreaks of lurid profanity when things went wrong, some of which were aimed at me when I failed at such apprentice tasks as retrieving the proper tool or holding a board just so. On the other hand, he was a hard worker, blessed with great stamina and a wide array of skills, from carpentry to music to technical writing. He kept account of the family finances to the penny. As with many a child of the Depression, money preyed constantly on his mind, compelling him to stash small sums of cash around the house.

What I cannot forgive was his temper; when he lost control, he was frightening, at least to me. At the dinner table one evening in the early 1950s, when we were living in the Philippines, something set him off, whereupon he stood up, hurled a plate of sandwiches across the room and stormed up the stairs. Although over the years I escaped physical abuse, Bill was not so fortunate, feeling father’s wrath in periodic scenes that sent me into an emotional netherworld. I regret to the core growing up without a close, loving relationship with a father whom I could trust and admire. The penalties were severe, not only in terms of my own development but in laying a foundation for my future role as a parent. The sins of the father truly are visited on his children, especially on his sons. I have struggled to lift this burden for over 70 years, and I work at it to this day. Nothing gives me greater comfort or encouragement in this effort than witnessing the unsurpassed parenting skills of my son, Brett, and daughter, Lisa. While most of the credit is clearly due to my wife, Dorene, my belated but deepening relationship with our children is paying dividends in mutual respect, trust and abundant love.

My mother, Katherine, was an entirely different matter, harder to fathom
and to know than Grady. Her father, Lee Jackson, Jr., was an erudite man who, having inherited his minister father’s command of the English language, went into the newspaper business. Indeed, the Jackson branch of the family tree proved perhaps its sturdiest, evolving a succession of patriots, landed gentry, and educators. However, Katherine’s father’s prolonged absences from the household, coupled with the lack of a loving relationship with her birth mother, had, I believe, a profound effect on Katherine’s personality and her parenting. Although she must have felt fulsome affection from her surrogate parents, Aunt Sister and Uncle Grover, that unrivaled attention may account for a hard edge that I perceived in her final years, one that to my mind made her increasingly elitist and judgmental. In fairness, I should add that my brother, Bill, who knew her better than anyone, does not share that judgment.

While my mother could be disarmingly gracious, and had an innate sense of justice, she rarely revealed herself, even to a camera, where in every photo I have of her, save a couple, her face is expressionless. She and I were close in many respects, if only of necessity with my father so often absent. I felt she was there for me if I needed her, and can recall an occasional intimate conversation in which I sought moral support after experiencing some emotional wound. Nonetheless, she failed me at the most visceral level of developmental need. In all the years of my childhood, indeed well into adult life, I cannot remember my mother once telling me she loved me, cared about me, thought I was smart or talented or handsome, or any of those reassurances that, even if wrong or exaggerated, bring a child security and confidence. By the time I was mature enough to appreciate that she had always harbored those sentiments, it no longer mattered.

My sister Anne evolved into a classic southern belle. We were for a long time close friends, constant and often sole companions on a succession of Army posts. She was naturally gregarious and adventuresome, while I was introverted and cautious. Not particularly wanting friends, I never envied her ability to gather them like cotton bolls stuffed in a sack. Rather, I was astonished at her prowess in attracting admirers. She was the center of male attention in Oakland, having her pick of any boy in the local litter, and by the time she was in the tenth grade, she was dating seniors from the University of Mississippi in Oxford. Our relationship remained close for many of the ensuing years, but foundered recently on differences in perception about shared events recorded herein that shaped our early years. That is perhaps understandable on one level in that our frames of personal reference were widely divergent in terms of gender, personality and relationship with our father. I deeply regret not being able to engage with her to parse whatever issues might be involved and
harbor still the hope that we might close this divide.

My brother Bill was born in Grenada in 1945, so he and I were too far apart in age to be playmates. He was even more quiet and bookish than I, and not nearly as athletic, which was not saying all that much. I honestly don’t know what he did with his time. I do know that he was smart and soft spoken, and kept mostly to himself. For many years he also repressed his sexual preference, since it was anathema to the majority of our citizenry, causing, I am sure, no end of conflicted choices and an unsettled persona. He tells me he has repressed all memories of his childhood. In our later years, despite the toll of separation and a grievance growing out of a misperception on my part, I have regained his trust, an effort that has paid dividends in an open, candid, and honest bond – and have his considerable editorial skills at my disposal.

Much like Oakland, my family had a decidedly mixed influence on me, and I still don’t quite know what to make of it. It wasn’t dysfunctional, probably wasn’t that different from many others, and produced three children who all went to college, got advanced degrees and earned their way in the world. My father made a belated but valiant effort in his retired years to moderate his temper. Gauging by his standing with my children, he was a stellar grandfather. While I now better understand the limitations that inhibited my life and personality, I will never regard him as a dad. His death in 1984 failed to stir in me the slightest emotion.

My mother lived into her tenth decade in good health and spirits. She spent her last quarter-century on this earth leading a full and happy life with Bill, who came out of the closet before my father’s death, amicably divorced from a childless marriage, and took on the responsibility of attending to our mother’s welfare. She moved from Oakland to the New York City area, where, in and near the city, she and Bill lived together for many years. They later took up full-time residence in Palm Springs, California, which strongly encouraged the decision Dorene and I made in 2001 to move to Laguna Beach, a venue my mother found most appealing during her several visits. By the time of her death seven years later, we had forged a mature, mutually satisfying relationship despite the occasional bump in the emotional road. Now she lies in eternal peace, beside her beloved Grady, in a hallowed little plot of family ground in a bucolic cemetery in Oakland, Mississippi. And at the end of her days, with Dorene’s gentle nudging, she finally allowed herself to tell her older son that she loved him.

The barest bones version of my formative years is that my family circumstances were for me a burden to be lifted rather than a joyful springboard to future success: no respected father figure or nurturing mother, no treasured
memories of family bonding, no sense of belonging or eager anticipation of what tomorrow might bring. But now, with both of my parents laid to rest, I draw comfort from having learned to share affection with my mother in her final years and to temper my disaffection for my father whose life’s course, like mine, was dictated by childhood penury rather than the ardent pursuit of a dream.
Chapter 4

Army Brat (1939 – 1955)

Although Oakland was a strong influence on my life for sixteen years, I lived there only episodically. Returning now to my life’s earliest moments, I was born on the seventeenth of June, 1939, at Fort Benning, Georgia, home to the U.S. Army’s Infantry School and paratrooper training program. I was given the first names of my two grandfathers George Butler and Lee Jackson. My father taught a high school-level Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in nearby Opelika, Alabama, at the time. On the global stage, events in Europe were spiraling toward another war, with Hitler’s invasion of Poland shortly after my birth. Two and a half years later America was swept up in World War II, and the repercussions soon began to intrude on our lives. In 1943, my father was sent to Fort Screven, situated on Tybee Island off the coast of Georgia, a link in America’s coastal defense system.

As post sergeant-major, Grady was accorded quarters on the brow of a hill a few hundred yards from the beach. My first childhood memories are of the ocean and the cold Atlantic waters, which, oddly, I would venture into only with my shoes on. I recall the military lookouts patrolling the beach on horseback, the blackout curtains pulled across the windows at night, and talk of the German submarines preying on coastal shipping. I was now four years old, and can vividly remember a variety of adventures with my sister Anne, to include climbing a tall observation tower sited between our house and the beach.

At the end of his tour at Fort Screven, with the Army needing ever more officers, Grady, being a seasoned non-commissioned officer who had finished his college degree in night school, was commissioned a first lieutenant in the Army Reserve. He was retained on active duty and assigned to the Adjutant General Corps, thus becoming a professional administrator, the specialty in which he remained for the rest of his career. When the war in the Pacific ended in August of 1945, my father, by then a captain, was assigned to unaccompanied duty in the Philippines, pausing en route to plant the family in Oakland. He returned two years later and we were off to Fort Jackson, South Carolina,
living first in a small community dubbed Dogpatch until being allocated hous-
ing on base, a very different ambiance. Our quarters were in one wing of an
abandoned hospital, which made for austere living.

In 1948, my father was sent back to the Philippines as a member of the
Joint United States Military Advisory Group, to help rebuild a nation left in
ruins by the Japanese invasion, prolonged occupation and bloody liberation.
We could not join him for the first year, so it was back to Oakland and the
fourth grade with Mrs. Mitchell, a stern soul who had no use for children and
maintained a three-foot long, two-inch wide leather strap at the side of her
desk to prove it.

As the school year ended, our family received approval to travel to the
Philippines, a trek so eventful, and a locale so exotic, that over the course
of the next two years the boundaries of my world view were vastly expand-
ed. The trip from Mississippi to San Francisco, where we boarded a ship for
Manila, should have earned my mother a medal. She piled the three of us –
with my brother Bill not yet four – into the car and drove 2500 miles through
floods, dust storms and searing heat.

We arrived at Camp Stoneman, in San Francisco, a day before our depar-
ture on the U.S.S. Ainsworth for the Pacific crossing. It was a trip I wanted to
last forever. Life aboard ship was endlessly fascinating. I spent the three weeks
exploring the vessel from stem to stern, sailing paper airplanes off the fantail,
dining on a huge bounty of food, including unlimited supplies of ice cream. It
was the happiest I had ever been.

After an uneventful trip, we reached the mouth of Manila Bay and entered
a setting right out of the movies. The harbor was still littered with sunken
Japanese ships, and the buildings surrounding it were pockmarked with can-
non fire. We left the serene, comfortable cocoon of the Ainsworth and were
plunged into the cacophony of Manila’s streets – old women squatting bare-
foot on their haunches jabbering and cackling, children running naked, shriek-
ing and playing among tin shanties and open sewers. After what seemed an
eternity, we made our way to our new home, one of several open-sided, two-
story, tin-roofed houses in a compound surrounded by barbed wire and pa-
trolled by armed guards protecting us from the rebellious Hukbalahap, more
popularly known as the Huks, the military arm of the Philippine Communist
party. We were a good hour outside Manila in a suburb named Quezon City,
after President Manuel Quezon.

We were greeted at the door of our quarters by Victory and Leanora, our
Filipino house girls, who lived in a back room on the first floor off the kitch-
en. There were four bedrooms upstairs, allowing each of us children a private
space. My father’s place of work was close by, but Anne and I had to take a bus to the American School located in the heart of Manila. I was dismayed to learn that school would start the week after our arrival and barely a month after the school year had ended in Oakland. Moreover, the sweltering afternoon heat limited class time from 8:00 a.m. to noon, necessitating a ten-month school year. Worse, it required catching the bus at 6:30 and enduring a sixty-minute ride over rutted roads with a bunch of boisterous schoolmates.

Happily, school life was very appealing. The building was in good repair and staffed with superb teachers. In the lobby, a daily word and weekly painting were displayed, which we were required to memorize, define and describe in a test taken each Monday morning. The course work was challenging and interesting. For example, I had to draw to scale the entire school grounds, which helped imprint the layout on my mind to this day. We had a half-hour of organized sport, invariably a soccer game. I loved playing soccer, but learned a harsh lesson about running with my tongue between my teeth. One day, I caught a ball flush under my chin and the force of the blow forced my jaws shut, cutting a hole through the middle of my tongue. Despite the pain and sporadic bleeding, at the end of the school day I elected to carry through with plans to spend the night with a friend who lived in Manila. Bad idea. I was miserable, made poor company and just wanted to go home.

I fared even worse the day I decided to single-handedly capture someone’s pet monkey that had escaped its cage and was roaming the housing compound. The guards had alerted the populace to the threat, as these creatures were bad tempered, had sharp teeth and nails, and would attack humans. My father kept one in a make-shift wire cage beside the house, and it was meaner than hell. Knowing their foul disposition, I don’t know what prompted me to try and chase one down. As things turned out, the wayward monkey pretty much found me. I was crossing an open field when suddenly it came tearing toward me as if possessed. I stood stock still as it raced by, dragging a length of broken chain affixed to its collar. Not wanting to lose the prize, I stomped on the end of the chain. Another bad idea. The monkey reached the end of the chain, was stopped dead in its tracks, flipped up in the air and fell flat on its back. After its head cleared, the thoroughly irritated animal got up, turned toward me and quickly got the picture. Not difficult, really, since I was still standing on the chain. It stalked back to my position, looked me in the eye, jumped up and clamped its teeth on my stomach. I punched it in the face, hard enough that it let go, and I ran back to the house. There followed a manic trip to the hospital and a series of painful rabies shots.

In 1951, orders came returning us stateside. For some reason, my father’s
departure was delayed, so the remainder of the family repaired once again to Oakland and moved into the small house up the road from Aunt Sister and Uncle Grover. When my father came home, he had just enough time to clear the brush, install a septic tank and build a room for me in the attic before reporting to his next assignment. As I started seventh grade, he departed Oakland for his new post at Camp Roberts in central California just north of Paso Robles. We joined him two months prior to the end of the school year in Atascadero, a planned community founded in 1913 by wealthy magazine publisher Edward Gardner Lewis, wrapped around Highway 101 an hour’s drive from the camp.

Despite my hopes, my father’s parenting did not improve, at least not from my perspective. I hated being around him. His impatience and temper made me extremely nervous. Anne continued to blossom, bringing home a variety of boyfriends, most of whom looked like strays. One arrived on a motorcycle, racing around the driveway like a madman. For the most part, I stayed by myself and read incessantly. I tried Boy Scouts, but that was a disaster. I earned one merit badge, Reading, twice over, and never got beyond Second Class. I went to two camps, one in the summer, the other in the dead of winter, and hated both. The summer camp entailed swimming in an icy mountain stream and long hikes in the scorching hot sun. Winter camp ended in disgrace and expulsion when I started my morning fire with lighter fluid after tiring of rubbing sticks together.

I did have one friend, Mike Mitchell, dark-haired, serious and great fun. We were 8th grade classmates, and our friendship was the only pleasant memory of the school year. Just as it started, I was fitted with braces to correct the undershot jaw I inherited from my mother. The procedure took place at the Camp Roberts dental clinic. The one resident orthodontist was scheduled for reassignment, so he did my entire mouth in one day, rather than what should have been two sessions a week apart. I was in the chair for eight hours while he wrapped every tooth in a metal band, fitting and refitting the sharp bands, implanted the upper and lower restraining wires, and attached the rubber bands whose steady tension would, over the course of two long years, reposition my jaw. Close to the worst day of my life. The pain was nearly unbearable. I could not eat solid food for a week. The inside of my mouth was shredded. Thus began a two-year ordeal that accomplished the objective of correcting my malocclusion. Although the original purpose was largely cosmetic, I would later discover that, but for this procedure, I would have been automatically disqualified to enter the Air Force Academy. Life’s largest doors can turn on such small hinges.
Eighth grade did serve up one high note, although it quickly turned sour. I entered a writing contest sponsored by the Army unit at Camp Roberts on the subject “Power for Peace,” and was named the winner from Atascadero. The prize was a trip to Camp Roberts over Memorial Day, the “highlight” being a ride in a tank. Last thing in the world I wanted to do and for good reason – it was loud, cramped and reeking of diesel fuel. That brief encounter persuaded me that whatever I might aspire to, the Army was not on the list.

Shortly before the end of that school year, my father received orders to Korea, where an armistice in the three-year long conflict had been declared. For us, that meant yet another return to Oakland, where I would complete the ninth and tenth grades, carry the newspaper, play football, raise a calf, put a bullet through my uncle’s car, and, oh yes, forgot to mention earlier, be voted “Most Intelligent Boy” and “Boy Most Likely to Succeed.” The confidence reposing in those accolades was about to be put to the test. My father returned from Korea in 1955 with orders for the Pentagon, in Arlington, Virginia. His new assignment changed my life. It put me on track to become that boy in the poster on the wall of the little brick post office in Oakland, Mississippi.
Nothing in my life had prepared me for Northern Virginia, certainly not little rural towns, guarded military bases or small, close-knit schools. My new home, Arlington, a bedroom community for much of the federal government work force, was sprawling, eclectic, vibrant, affluent, and sophisticated, with large, diverse, first-rate schools. Across the Potomac River lay Washington, D.C., an international city, highly cultured and very tough-minded. From the moment we arrived in early June of 1955, I felt completely out of place.

I got an early introduction to my new school, Washington and Lee High School, abbreviated “W-L.” It sat on a large campus, renowned for its architecture, enjoyed a top ten ranking nationwide, and was home to twenty-two hundred students known by their mascot name, the “Generals.” My mother had deduced that typing would be an essential skill in this high-powered academic environment, so she enrolled me in the school’s intensive two-month summer school typing program. I was lost the minute I set foot in the building. The multi-story structure was cavernous, and the students looked as if they came from another planet. Dressed in quality shirts, slacks, skirts and blouses, they were a far cry from Oakland High School, where the standard uniform was Levis, a T-shirt and maybe shoes in the winter. Which is what I was wearing. I looked and felt like a janitor. Actually, the janitors were better dressed.

I spent the morning hiding behind an Underwood manual typewriter in the back of the room. On returning home, I told my mother that I had to have some new clothes or drop out of the class, a declaration that, given the tight family budget, could not have been welcome. However, sensing the depth of my distress, she found the money to raise my sartorial standing a notch. Over the summer I became an accomplished typist and, suitably clothed, was minimally prepared for what the fall semester was to bring.

My Mississippi curriculum was a poor fit with W-L’s college-oriented
The counselor I met with smiled wanly at my two years of Agriculture, while observing that I was missing several core subjects such as Biology and Plane Geometry. The latter deficiency took its toll in my first Physics test, wherein I encountered a problem that clearly could not be solved. My conclusion that it was a trick question was refuted when the teacher casually noted it required a simple application of the Pythagorean Theorem. I knew at that moment that I was in serious trouble academically, a reality that carried an emotional overtone as much of my self-esteem rested on my skills in the classroom. To this point in my school life, I had rarely received any grade below an ‘A,’ and I had arrived at W-L from Oakland with a 4.0 GPA, which was now clearly in jeopardy, not to mention my college prospects. This was do or die, and I poured myself into my studies. Fortunately, most of my teachers understood my plight and went out of their way to help. I gradually caught up, taking great pleasure in mastering the Pythagorean Theorem along the way.

Although a diligent student, I balanced my class work with participation in three other activities that helped me become more rounded and sociable: student council, a fraternity and the crew team – the sport of rowing. My introduction to crew came in mid-corridor, as I was walking between classes. Lost in thought, I suddenly felt a hand on my arm and looked up to see a wiry man, almost gaunt, with piercing eyes and a pleasant smile. He introduced himself as Charlie Butt and asked if I knew anything about the crew team. I had no idea what he was talking about, but felt an immediate chemistry between us that I think he sensed as well. Charlie told me he was the coach of the rowing squad and thought I looked like good coxswain material. He asked me to talk to my parents about the idea, and, if they approved, he would personally take me in tow to teach me the role.

This was no small matter because it would entail a great deal of time and commitment for eight months of the year. Practice began after class, with a trip to the Potomac Boat Club, located on the river at the D.C. foot of the Francis Scott Key Bridge, which connects Georgetown to Rosslyn, Virginia. We spent two hours on the water, then stowed the shell, or boat, as it is more commonly called by those in the sport, showered, dressed and made our way home. I caught a ride with a teammate who lived close by, arriving at the house at 7:00 p.m. Crew is a physically grueling sport except for the coxswain, or “cox” for short, whose job is to think versus row, i.e., to steer the boat, set the rowing pace, ensure the oarsmen are pulling evenly and act as tactician during a race. The position demands a modicum of leadership to develop teamwork, sustain morale, and gauge the capability of the rowers in the heat of competition.

I began as cox for the “junior four” boat, so named for the number of
oarsmen. This shell is smaller and easier to maneuver than the eight-man boats. As an eleventh grader, I was a year late to the game and would compete with a cadre of coxswains who were older and more experienced. Thankfully, I was fortunate to inherit four guys who were intensely competitive, got along well and accepted me onto their boat without reservation. We had an excellent season and decided to stay together over the summer to compete in races along the East Coast. That decision paid off when Charlie, impressed by our initiative and success, moved me up to the senior eight boat for the 1957 season.

My new oarsmen were an extraordinary group, all strong, smart and highly motivated. They were headed by Pete Kresky, who rowed the eight or stroke position. We sat face-to-face in the shell and soon developed a powerful, winning formula. Pete became known as “Tommy-gun” Kresky, for his determination to row at any pace required to win. My challenge was to keep Pete’s competitiveness within the limits of the other seven oarsmen. Crew is the quintessential team sport in that the boat can perform only at the level of its least skilled or less fit member. There is no room for a superstar. Both sides of the boat must pull equally or it will move off course, requiring the cox to make an offsetting rudder input that creates drag and slows the forward movement. Each oar must keep exactly on pace and in rhythm or disaster ensues. A blade slow to exit the water can become trapped, “catching a crab,” bringing the boat to a halt and on occasion lifting the oarsman completely out of the shell. We spent many hours on the Potomac honing our performance under Coach Butt’s tutelage. He rode in a weather-beaten outboard, megaphone in hand, moving from boat to boat. His enthusiasm and demand for excellence were infectious. Our skill and course times steadily improved and we were eager to start the racing season.

My mates on the crew team took me on as a project. They respected my intellect and intense commitment to succeed, but realized I needed help making my way socially. That led to an invitation to join a fraternity, one of several that, along with a like number of sororities, counted among their members many of the most popular and talented students in W-L’s two thousand-plus population. I felt once more like a fish out of water, decidedly un-cool and awkward around girls. Many of these kids drank, smoked and had serious romantic relationships. By the middle of my senior year I had succumbed to two of those pursuits. My fraternity brother, Tony Schwarzwalder, who was the epitome of laid-back, button-down cool, introduced me to beer. My first binge ended on the sofa in his basement, as did most of the six-pack of Budweiser I had consumed. My first real romantic interest came in the person of Kay Skinner, a member of our sister sorority. Dark-haired and brown-eyed, with a
soft smile and sweet disposition, Kay was popular, fun and just right for me at that point in my life.

I can’t recall how I came to be nominated for treasurer of the student council, but it was probably the work of my English teacher, Mrs. June Shurtliff, who was also an advisor to the council. She was a wise and caring mentor who quietly brought out the best in her students. Her subject being my strong suit, I was one of her favorites. I was not keen on the idea of running for office, particularly since it required a speech in front of the entire student body at the last spring assembly. I worked hard on my remarks, which included a corny joke supplied by my father, but my speech became secondary to a serendipitous opportunity provided by my opponent who had preceded me at the podium. At the close of her remarks, she had tossed a handful of pennies on the gym floor and sat down. Without really thinking about it, I stood up, walked out onto the floor and began picking them up. The audience went wild, clapping and cheering. I can hardly remember giving the speech, but I had the presence of mind to keep it short – “You won’t see me throwing money away” – and sit down, sensing that the election was in the bag. And, so it was.

The job of treasurer was more than I bargained for. We had a sizable budget that had to be accounted for in classic double-entry bookkeeping. The money manager was also responsible for putting together and selling programs for the home football games. This was a big revenue producer, especially from local merchants persuaded to advertise in the program. For me, that meant pounding the pavement all summer, whenever I was not practicing or racing with my boat. It was a terrible job for an introverted high school senior still trying to get comfortable with his upscale environment. My experience collecting newspaper bills in Oakland got me through it, but I knew I had no future in sales.

The next phase of this responsibility was equally onerous, that is, gathering data on the opposing teams, putting the copy together, and getting several thousand copies printed. The trick was to get the run just right, enough to satisfy every paying customer without too many expensive, unsold extras. Finally, I had to build a sales force to work the games, collect and count the proceeds, and deposit same in a bank account. As much as I detested the duty, my interaction with the other members of the council made it more than worthwhile. I marveled at their skills and maturity, especially the graceful touch of the president, Susie Wilson, who presided over our meetings and responsibilities with ease and aplomb. She was thoughtful, multi-talented, highly energetic, and became one of my early role models.

At some point early in the fall semester of my senior year, it dawned on me
that if I wanted to go to college I had best begin making some preparations. I
understood vaguely that there were tests to be taken and applications to be
made, but the long pole in the tent was clearly money. I took that issue to my
father, who told me the economic facts of Butler life. Anne was a year into
college, and her expenses were absorbing every dime of disposable income.
Then he gave me some pointed guidance: get a scholarship or join the Army.
At that instant, two memories came flooding back. The first was the tank ride
at Camp Roberts, which took the Army out of play. The second was the poster
on the post office wall in Oakland, Mississippi. Without hesitation, I informed
my father that I wanted to go to the Air Force Academy.

His first reaction was that there was no such institution, that I must be think-
ing of West Point. I related the story about the poster and Grady said he would
contact Senator James O. Eastland, Mississippi’s elder statesman on the Hill, to
verify the existence of an Air Force Academy and inquire about an appointment.
The Senator was positive on both counts, and arranged for me to take the en-
trance examination scheduled for March 9th of 1957. At that juncture, all my
college eggs were in one basket, so I set about trying to maximize my chances
of making the grade. I bought a set of Charles Atlas weights, and undertook
a three-nights-a-week lifting regimen to prepare for the physical fitness test.
Satisfied that my extra-curricular activities had merit, I then filled every hole
in my academic program with solid courses. I thought I had all the bases cov-
ered. But come March, when I reported to Bolling Air Force Base, just across the
Potomac River in D.C., my quest was nearly aborted at the starting gate.

The entrance examination entailed a five-day-long series of tests ranging
from academic to psychological to physical. I reported in on a Monday morn-
ing along with several hundred other applicants from D.C., Maryland and
Northern Virginia. I was shocked by the number of candidates, all of whom
were bigger, stronger, and sounded very intelligent. Some had already joined
the military and now wanted to move up to officer status. My confidence,
already badly shaken, was, within two hours, completely shattered. After an
orientation, we were herded into a long line outside the office of the flight
surgeon, Air Force parlance for a physician who has had special training in the
physiology and maladies associated with flying. We lined up in alphabetical
order and were put through an initial physical screening, designed to detect
any immediately disqualifying deficiencies.

I did fine until the last station, where I stepped on a scale for a weight and
height check. The young medical technician taking these measurements called
out, “Five foot six inches, 110 pounds,” whereupon the flight surgeon picked
up my records, stamped “Rejected” on the top page, and tossed the folder
unceremoniously into the growing DQ pile. I was stunned. When I inquired as to the problem, he informed me I was five pounds too light for my height to satisfy the Air Force. Desperate for another chance, I asked if I could have until Friday, when the final physicals were given, to make the weight. I don’t know what he saw in my face or heard in my voice, but miraculously, the doctor grasped the depth of my despair and agreed to my request, retrieving my folder and placing it in the Hold basket on his desk.

I went to the phone and called my father, who told me to go to the dining hall, find the mess sergeant, and tell him I was the son of a former NCO and that I needed his help. When I asked how I would identify the mess sergeant, Grady laughed and said it would be easy. It was. He had a huge belly and a big smile and was delighted to play a role in my drama. His solution was straightforward. Every minute that I was not taking tests, I would be in the dining hall eating whatever he put in front of me. And that is exactly what I did, for the next ninety-six hours. By Friday morning I felt like a force-fed hog, but lo and behold, I had gained exactly five pounds. Then the plan hit a snag. The final physical was preceded by the physical aptitude test, a two-hour ordeal in a sweltering gym. Not thinking about the consequences of my exertions, when I arrived at the doctor’s office for my weigh-in and mounted the scale, I discovered that two of my hard earned pounds had evaporated. The doctor was impressed that I had managed to gain even three pounds, but informed me he had no choice but to reconfirm the disqualification.

Devastated, I sat down on the couch in his outer office with tears running down my face, having no idea what to do next. That solution was supplied by the young medical technician sitting at the desk across from me, the same young man who had taken my measurements the Monday before. He asked me what was wrong, so I stammered out the story of the missing two pounds. He pulled open the desk drawer, took out a quarter and called me over. “Take this,” he said, “go to the canteen just down the corridor and buy a quart of chocolate milk.” I thought that was a very odd thing to ask of someone he hardly knew, and who was in the middle of an emotional crisis. But, I went, bought the milk, brought it back to the office and gave it to him. “No,” he said, “it’s not for me, it’s for you.” “Why on earth?” I asked. “Because,” he replied, “it weighs two pounds.” Brilliant. I chugged the entire bottle while he went in and beseeched the doctor to weigh me one more time. When the doctor asked why, my young rescuer said, “Just trust me.” Back on the scale I went, and as I stood trembling in my skivvies, the needle stopped at precisely 115 pounds. The doctor grinned, retrieved my records, blanked out the DQ box and put the folder in the Fully Qualified basket. I was spared from the Army.
That would prove to be very small comfort.

Elated, I resumed my studies and my sport. We were back in the water gearing up for the racing season. My guys were in terrific shape and ready to go. We won every race and became the darling of the local sports pages. Finally, we were down to two events, the Stokesbury Cup held in Philadelphia in late April, and the National Schoolboy Championship, to be held that year on the Potomac River, our home course. We left for Philly on Friday morning, won our preliminary heat that afternoon, and were on the starting line at 10:00 Saturday morning for the finals. The race went perfectly, and we won by a comfortable margin. I brought the boat into the dock, exited and was hoisted aloft by my joyful oarsmen. As they performed the winning ritual of throwing me in the river, my eye caught a completely unexpected sight. My father, whom I had last seen at home, was running toward the dock waving a piece of paper. I knew in an instant what it was. I was now a member of the Class of 1961 of the United States Air Force Academy.

The school year ended on a happy note. We won the nationals on a brilliant Saturday morning in May. The Washington Post carried a major story, and Charlie Butt declared that I was the best coxswain he had ever worked with. I graduated fourth in my class, just behind the three valedictorians. That runner-up experience served me well – four years later I would find myself in precisely the same circumstance after four arduous but transformative years at the nation’s newest service academy.
As I boarded the tri-tail TWA Constellation at D.C.’s National Airport on that fateful Thursday, the 4th of July, 1957, I had a sense of foreboding. The Academy had provided literature describing the rigors of life as a Basic Cadet during Summer Training, and it sounded a lot like the Army, only worse. While there was no mention of tanks, the brochure dwelled at length on discipline, mental toughness, physical strength, and character. It made very clear that this was a deliberately challenging test designed to weed out the unable and the unsuited. I began to harbor doubts on both measures, as it now dawned on me that the military life I had mostly experienced as an innocent bystander had not been all that appealing. The one book I had read on military history, Guadalcanal Diary, made a searing impact. The core lesson was graphically portrayed: the profession of arms is about killing people and destroying things. Its culture is founded on competitiveness, a macho persona, austere life in the field, and a noble acceptance of sacrifice, including death. The culture is highly chauvinistic, prizes courage and requires the capacity to endure mental suffering and bodily pain. Every element of basic training is keyed to strengthening these qualities and attitudes. At the nation’s service academies this acculturation process is the defining objective of an intense four-year regimen in which every student is expected to achieve a high degree of academic, athletic and military prowess.

When I entered, that objective was enshrined in the Academy mission statement: “To provide instruction, experience and motivation to each cadet so that he will graduate with the knowledge and the qualities of leadership required of ... a future air commander.” As my cadet tenure unfolded, I came to realize that, whatever my expectations at the outset, this rather bland formulation masked a reality that in my judgment incited behavior sharply at odds with the purposes of the Academy and the Air Force it served. Ten years later,
I would return to the Academy and undertake an initiative to change the substance and tone of the entire program, beginning with the mission statement. But, first, I had to submit to the prescribed instruction, experience and motivation. That proved a very mixed blessing.

Flying with me to Denver, temporary Academy home while permanent facilities were being constructed north of Colorado Springs, were three other basic cadets in the Class of ’61. I met them only briefly, and just as well; I was the only one of the four to graduate. We spent the night at the same hotel, making our way the next morning to the bus station where we boarded a shuttle to Lowry Air Force Base. The fledgling Academy was housed on a section of the base known as Lowry Two, which had served as a World War II Army Air Corps training facility. It comprised a handful of two-story wooden barracks surrounding an asphalt quadrangle. On the perimeter were situated a dining hall, chapel, one-story staff building, athletic fields and a cluster of academic buildings. This would be the center of my universe for the next thirteen months.

Since the Academy had opened its doors only two years earlier, it was short on both upperclassmen and tradition. To play the role of senior cadets, who would normally provide leadership to the three more junior classes, the Air Force had brought in a host of first lieutenants and captains. Many were graduates of West Point, a few had attended Annapolis and the remainder came from other commissioning sources such as ROTC. Most were pilots, an essential qualification to serve as a role model to a group of cadets who were expected to become aviators. These young professionals were called Air Training Officers, or ATOs.

The inaugural AFA rituals and traditions were lifted largely from the United States Military Academy (West Point), not surprising as the Air Force was born and matured as the Army Air Corps – later the Army Air Forces – and became an autonomous service only after World War II. Thus, the Honor Code, military training, classroom instruction and physical education were carbon copies of those at our sister academy. For those of us en route to the gates of Lowry AFB on the morning of Friday, July 5th, however, the most prominent facet of our introduction to military life was an eight-week period known at West Point as Basic Cadet Training, or “Beast Barracks.” Nothing could be more appropriately named.

As we stepped off the buses at our Lowry summer home, we were spared the traditional confrontation with raging upperclassmen. The powers that were had altered the first-day reception by instead deploying a contingent of sharply dressed, courteous NCOs, who ushered us through in-processing, uniform fitting, hair shearing, and assignment to our summer units and Spartan
two-man dormitory rooms. My roommate was a nice kid from the country, with a nasal twang, and bowed legs that fared poorly in our rudimentary weekend drill session. While that did not auger very well for him, none of us would be spared during what lay ahead; we had been lulled into a false sense of well-being that dissipated early Monday morning.

**Basic Cadet**

As we three hundred-plus unsuspecting souls shuffled from our dorms and herded together on the quadrangle, the air was thick with the same anticipation that must have marked the Coliseum in ancient Rome as doomed gladiators awaited their fate. I was assigned to the 2nd Element of ‘C’ Flight, 2nd Squadron, one of three 100-man units comprising our group of basic cadets. The NCOs got us properly arrayed before departing our company and leaving us to the coming onslaught. I had already gotten off to a bad start with some unwitting infraction as I moved toward my assigned place. One of the majors lining the quadrangle bade me “Halt,” said something unpleasant, and ended with a curt, “Post.” Never having been called a post, I had no idea how to respond, but it was pretty clear the conversation was over so I pressed on into ranks with my compatriots. Only then did I take closer note of the cadre of ATOs who were arrayed on precisely marked spots that formed a grid on the asphalt training area for positioning the several elements, flights, and squadrons. Suddenly, the word, “Report,” rang out in the still morning air, followed by a crisp, “All present or accounted for, sir.” Then came the ominous words, “Fall out and make corrections.” Given what followed, “Unleash the hounds,” would have been more apt. All hell broke loose. The ATOs were on us in an instant. Impeccably dressed in starched khakis, spotless white gloves, brilliantly shined shoes and classic brimmed hats, they began a verbal feeding frenzy. The impact was numbing. At one point, an electric razor came sailing from the balcony of a dormitory and shattered on the asphalt. A booming voice announced that these devices were unacceptable, which the scattered remnants had already made quite clear. It was impossible to think rationally, eliciting all manner of bizarre responses. Told to reach for Colorado, the man next to me bent over and put his hands on the ground rather than simply pulling his shoulders back and down. A few could not give their names when asked, or recall where they were from. I held up under this opening volley, but was about to lose it, big time.

The abuse was interrupted momentarily as we were marched to the dining
hall for breakfast. We sat nine to a table headed by an ATO. The occupants of the seat at the foot of the table, or “ramp,” and of the chairs to its right and left, had duties designated as Cold Pilot, Hot Pilot, and Crew Chief, respectively. The Crew Chief received platters of food and handed them to the cadet on his left to begin their journey to the presiding ATO. The Cold Pilot poured and distributed the cold beverages, milk for breakfast, and concoctions known as Ti-ger-pis and Pan-ther-pis, given their color and taste, for lunch and dinner. The Hot Pilot was in charge of whatever pitchers of hot liquids arrived at the table. I am not making this up.

Meal hours were devoted to nutrition, discipline and the reciting from Basic Cadet Knowledge, a small blue and white book that we had to carry at all times except during physical training. Though pocket size, it contained a trove of material about the lore, leaders, organization and equipment of the Air Force. We were given a short time to memorize its contents before becoming vulnerable to recitation on command. Any mistake in rendering this knowledge, any lapse in table decorum or posture, or any other infraction perceived by the ATO, resulted in an order to “Sit Up!” – a position of rigid attention on the front edge of the wooden chair, with the chin pulled back into the throat, eyes on the plate and hands on the thighs, held until the ATO directed, “Carry on, “ which might or might not come before the end of the meal.

The environment was extremely stressful, and purposefully so, a continuation of the in-your-face form of address that began on the quadrangle, whose purpose was to test and strengthen our capacity to think and act in the midst of the chaos and confusion endemic to crises, especially combat. Six years later that ingrained capability would save my life. At the moment, it simply revealed my vulnerability, as I became completely unnerved by the deafening cacophony that engulfed the mess hall: instruction from the ATOs on table protocol, bellowed announcements of the arrival of food and drink, and incessant tongue lashing. Success in getting any appreciable amount of nutrition depended on following directions perfectly, holding the prescribed eating posture of back straight and eyes down, eating small portions so the mouth could be cleared quickly, and being blessed with table mates who drew more attention than oneself from the ATO. On this score, I must have seemed a godsend to my eight companions.

The main course for our first breakfast in this maelstrom was pancakes, arriving twelve to a platter. After being received and announced by the Crew Chief, they had made their way to me en route to the ATO, when he singled me out for some infraction. I set the platter down on top of my plate to absorb a scathing rebuke that left me completely nonplussed. When told to carry on, I
looked down at the platter of pancakes and, in a state of shock, proceeded to slather all twelve with butter and syrup, and to begin eating. Finally, the man to my left, no doubt as hungry as I, could no longer hold his peace. Seeing the pancakes disappearing out of the corner of his eye, he stuck his right fist straight out in front of him, the prescribed movement to attract the ATO's attention, and shouted, “Pancakes for Basic Cadet Doe.”

The ATO, realizing that the pancakes had yet to reach him, turned to chastise Doe. What he saw at the adjacent seat left him slack-jawed with amazement. When he recovered, he got up, walked directly behind my chair, and unleashed a display of verbal pyrotechnics that brought momentary silence to the entire hall. To make matters worse, no additional food was allowed to be brought and I was made to consume the entire platter while my starving comrades watched. That was my last meal for days to come. I survived only by the grace of my roommate who at great risk squirreled morsels of food for me.

Basic Cadet training was a 24/7 endurance course. Every minute was accounted for by some form of academic instruction, Honor Code orientation, drill, physical training and the dreaded bayonet course. Why future Air Force leaders required proficiency in skewering the enemy was never made clear. For me, it was far and away the most physically challenging aspect of the program. With bayonet, the M-1 rifle came in at 15% of my body weight. After 40 minutes of thrusts and parries, followed by a mile run with the rifle held in front of my chest, I was physically exhausted, barely able to hang on to the weapon. I was spared potential elimination on this score by a classmate who took its weight and most of mine for the last half-mile.

In fact, the rifle became my albatross, thanks to an episode four weeks into the summer. Following an hour of drill, my formation was marched to the cleaners before we returned to our rooms. When my name was called, I went inside and picked up a complement of freshly starched uniforms, slipped the fingers of my left hand through the hanger hooks, hoisted them over my shoulder and returned to formation. There I stood at parade rest, rifle in my right hand, clothes in the left, and my fingers becoming numb. Suddenly, in the heat, my wheel hat began to slip down my sweaty forehead and headed toward the ground. Fearing for the highly polished brim, I let go the rifle and grabbed for the hat. Bad choice. Big mistake. As the rifle clattered to the pavement, I bent to retrieve it, and was instantly surrounded by a cluster of ATOs who made very clear that I had committed a cardinal sin.

My punishment was to sleep with my weapon for the next three nights, which I thought odd but manageable. Following Taps the first evening, I slipped the rifle inside the sheets and against the side of the mattress adjacent to the
Air Force Academy Cadet (1957 – 1961)

wall where it would be secure but not a bother. I had missed the point of the
exercise. The door to the room burst open and my element leader demanded
to see the rifle. I clamored out of bed and pointed to it, prompting him to
rip the sheets and blanket off the bed, and then demand that I field strip the
weapon into its component parts. When I finished, he scooped up the dozen
or so pieces and scattered them the length of the mattress. Next, he ordered
me to remake the bed and get in it. Now, I got the picture. For the first time in
my life I slept without turning over.

Two elements of classroom instruction remain vivid in my memory. The
first was a series of films on the evils of communism, the relentless march
through Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II, the onset of the
Cold War, and the dawn of the age of nuclear weapons. The Soviets were por-
trayed as ten feet tall, cartoonishly menacing and bent on global domination,
while America stood as the sole bulwark against their nefarious aims. Nuclear
weapons were cast as our salvation, accounting for more hours of footage, the
most graphic devoted to nuclear weapon tests, the bombers of the Strategic
Air Command, and the scowling face of its iconic commander, General Curtis
E. LeMay. At this juncture, I would never have believed that thirty-four years
later, on a snowy morning at Offutt AFB, Nebraska, a day’s drive to the east, I
would take charge of LeMay’s former outfit just as the Cold War was ending.

Nearly as absorbing as memorizing Basic Cadet Knowledge was our ori-
entation to the Honor Code, which took place in the evening hours after din-
ner. This was the only time we were relatively at ease in the presence of an
upperclassman. The lessons were taught by “honor representatives,” select
members of the Class of 1959 who had been named to their position by their
peers. Their responsibility was daunting: to hear cases of alleged violations of
the Code and render up or down judgments. A guilty verdict meant immedi-
ate separation from the Academy, no questions asked. The cases were heard
in the evening and the guilty were gone by sunup. The honor representatives
were judges, jury and hangmen.

The Code required all cadets to take an oath that, “We will not lie, cheat,
or steal; nor will we allow among us those who do.” Honor instruction was de-
signed to impart a full understanding of the implications of that commitment.
It began with a history of the concept of right and wrong, delved into the nu-
ances of quibbling (skirting the truth to avoid an honor violation), stressed
the vital importance of integrity in military units and operations, and covered
honor cases that had resulted in dismissal. The most difficult prescription of
the Code was that toleration of a violation was as damning as personally lying,
cheating or stealing. That flew in the face of the buddy code that prevailed in
society at large, where ratting on a friend was itself tantamount to dishonorable behavior. Many a cadet would founder on this conundrum.

As the summer progressed, the mental and physical demands took their toll. Our numbers began to shrink from the initial 300+ aspirants, selected from 10,000 applicants, comprising the Class of 1961. We lost our first member within seconds, when he stepped out of his chauffeured car, took one look at the grounds, climbed back in and departed. Others quit as they reached the limits of their endurance; some were judged unfit by our overseers and eliminated. I imagine I was somewhere on the cusp. Quitting never crossed my mind; to the contrary, I prayed constantly for solace and for divine intervention. I had hoped that if I could survive the summer things might get better. In fact, they got worse.

At the conclusion of basic training, we survivors were redesignated 4th Class cadets, or doolies, a label akin to West Point “plebes,” but unique to the Air Force. That initial success carried no guarantee; the ATOs’ two-year role complete, they returned to the real Air Force, leaving our future training in the hands of the classes of 1959 and 1960, 2nd and 3rd Classmen (juniors and sophomores), now deemed sufficiently mature and trained to take on the responsibility of overseeing my class. With rare exception, they were not. We were lambs being led to the slaughter.

4th Classman

I remained in ‘C’ Flight, 2nd Squadron. My summer roommate had not made the cut, so I was issued a new one. Clair Carling was a perfect fit. Extremely bright, personable, and cool-headed, Clair was easy to get along with and had no annoying habits. He was wonderfully talented – indeed, a skilled pianist – and he took everything in stride. I learned he was Mormon, about which religion I knew nothing, but he never talked about his faith; he just lived it. We roomed on the second floor and tried to keep a low profile. Clair succeeded, but I never had a chance. Three members of the Class of ’60 collectively decided I was unsuited for the Academy and began a campaign to force me out. I was hounded constantly. At meals I recited Knowledge at the expense of eating. I would return from class to find my side of the room torn apart. My demerit count began to spiral toward the threshold of mandatory elimination. Then a strange thing happened. The hazing stopped. Cold. It would be years before I knew why.

At the beginning of the academic term, we were given an opportunity
to try out for varsity sports. Other than football, where top athletes were actively recruited, the wide variety of teams were manned by volunteers. Notwithstanding my love for diving, I elected to give gymnastics a try. My high school had acquired a trampoline my senior year, and I had spent a lot of time playing around on it. Since there were only two trampoline specialists at the Academy, one from each of the upper classes, I thought I might have a shot at the third spot. Fall practice began right off the bat, so I had several months to make the grade before the spring competition season. The lead trampolinist, a senior from the Class of ’59, was excellent but also had a penchant for getting in trouble and being put on confinement. His Class of ’60 counterpart was good but prone to fly off the apparatus. Neither they nor the coach were much given to instruction, so I mostly learned by trial and error.

After gaining some proficiency in the basic skill of back tuck-somersaulting, I progressed to the next level of adding a full twist. Fortunately, a belted device attached to ropes and pulleys was available for learning. However, when the time came to solo, my first attempt ended in disaster. I lost my orientation halfway through and crashed to the bed. My right knee slammed into my forehead, opening a large gash. I was carted unconscious to the hospital, sewn up and held overnight for observation. The next day I was released, face swathed in bandages, and returned to the gym for another go, this time successful. That evening, my meal was blessedly uninterrupted. I was allowed to eat in peace for the first time in weeks. When I returned to my room, everything was still in place. My tormentors pulled in their horns and let me be. Eventually, long after graduation, one of them told me that my squadron commander had been so impressed by my immediate return to the trampoline after being injured that he had called them off. I was outraged by their arbitrary and capricious behavior. It was part and parcel of what drove my later determination to change the system. Although I had been spared by a serendipitous intervention, many of my classmates were driven from the Academy by just this stripe of irresponsible, adolescent upperclassmen.

4th Class year proved to be another endurance test. It was us against them, quarter neither given nor asked, just grind it out, an endless round of room inspections, shoe-shining, Knowledge spouting, pushups, and ass-chewings. The only respite was over the Christmas holidays, when we remained at Lowry while the upperclassmen were gone for two weeks. As the year progressed, I excelled academically, competed in every gymnastics meet, lettering at season’s end. I also survived 48 class hours of boxing and judo, achieved a measure of respect in the eyes of my upperclassmen – and gained ten pounds. When June finally arrived, my class was “recognized,” that is released from bondage.
and promoted to 3rd Class status. I was named to the Superintendent’s List, acknowledging superior standing in academics, athletics and military training, an accolade I would earn each of the following three years.

3rd Classman

Despite our newfound freedom, we remained confined to the Academy grounds for the next two summer months, enduring a regimen of more classes and physical training. We were now permitted to be at ease outside the confines of our room, but otherwise life was much the same. The vast majority of upperclassmen remained aloof and were universally addressed as “sir.” All of us were counting the days until our four weeks of leave, beginning in early August. One week from that long anticipated interlude, I put it and myself at severe risk.

On a slow Saturday morning in July, one of my classmates, Chuck Coryn, a member of the varsity swim team, came to me with a novel suggestion: “Let’s go watch the annual Air Force swimming and diving competition being held this afternoon over on Lowry One” (the base had two distinct venues, with the Academy housed on Lowry Two). He and I were both avid divers, though my participation was limited to the squadron intramural team. Taking leave of my senses – this would be a wholly unauthorized adventure, AWOL to be precise – I accepted. Huge mistake. Not content to be mere spectators, we took along our trunks and at the conclusion of the event decided to get in some impromptu practice, i.e., show off. After a warm-up dive or two, I strode to the end of the low board, turned around and launched into a double back somersault. As I left the board and initiated the rotation, I realized that my trampoline muscle memory had taken command. Rather than leaving at a slight backward angle, I executed the dive directly over the board. As I opened up from my tuck after one and a half revolutions, I struck it face first.

Chuck was in the water in a flash and hauled me to the steps, where I was pulled from the pool by stunned spectators, my face a bloody mess. Chuck climbed out, bent close to my ear and whispered these words of comfort: “We have one hour to be in ranks for dinner formation.” That chilling reality cut through the pain; the prospect of hanging does indeed clarify the mind. I knew we had to get back in time at any cost. An ambulance arrived and whisked the two of us to the base hospital emergency room, where the attending physician was standing by. After I was rolled onto the operating table and cleaned up, the doctor told me stitches would be required, a lot of them. When I asked
him how long it would take, he said it would go quickly after the anesthesia became effective, in about twenty minutes or so. Trusting his discretion, I told him that was too long, that my friend and I were cadets absent without permission from the Academy, and that we needed to be back for dinner in forty-five minutes. He asked if I was prepared for him to do the stitches without anesthesia. I asked him to get started. Chuck watched all this with some mixture of incredulity, admiration and anxiety. He had the ambulance at the ready and my clothes in hand. Twenty minutes and twenty stitches later, I was wheeled aboard and the race was underway. I dressed en route, and we were dropped off just outside the Academy grounds about five minutes from the dining hall, where we arrived with a minute to spare.

I was not exactly inconspicuous. I had five stitches in my left cheek, an equal number across the bridge of my nose and ten in my forehead, which precluded wearing a cap. Not surprisingly, the Officer of the Day stopped in front of me as I stood in ranks waiting to be called inside for dinner. “What,” he inquired, “happened to you?” Complying with the Honor Code, I replied that I had been practicing my diving and had hit the board. Happily, that much of the truth satisfied his curiosity and he went on his way. By the following Friday, I was sufficiently healed to dispense with bandages and I boarded the plane for home, a born again, law-abiding cadet.

My few weeks of freedom in Arlington drove home to me that the Air Force Academy was having a strong impact on my perceptions of civilian life. I had become more uptight and judgmental. My experiences were entirely different from those of my friends in other universities, beginning with the fact that mine was a male-only institution. Nothing compared to the 4th Class System of rigid discipline and punishments. The Honor Code, with its non-toleration clause, had no counterpart. I felt oddly out of place, conversations were awkward and casual get-togethers had no appeal. Whatever urge I may have had to talk about cadet life quickly dissipated when I found that it sounded weird to anyone who had not lived it. For better or for worse, the Academy’s process of acculturation was beginning to take hold.

By September of 1958, the grounds of the permanent site, just north of Colorado Springs, were sufficiently complete to allow a move from Lowry. We were summarily loaded onto busses, offloaded at the northernmost of the two gates to the 17,500 acre campus, and marched two miles to the central cadet area. There we were greeted by a project in work, including the partially constructed chapel and a future “Air Garden,” presently comprised of a series of dirt mounds. This sharply contrasting venue was reflected in the changed tenor of my 3rd Class year: blessedly quiet. It was also devoid of meaningful
duties, a wasted year really, from a military training perspective. We were al-
lowed some interaction with the new 4th Class but I wasn’t comfortable with
the prevailing norm for instruction and correction that I had suffered. My first
go at it was a dismal failure. I went nose to nose with some miscreant from
the Class of 1962, delivered my inaugural tirade, and finished with the admon-
ishment, “You’d better ship up or shape out of here.” Neither one of us could
keep a straight face.

As the fall semester wore on, there was growing excitement throughout
the Academy over the performance of the football team, which was drawing
national attention for its undefeated record in its first full Division I-A season.
The team had been coached through its first three seasons by Buck Shaw, who
had been recruited from the NFL Philadelphia Eagles. Armed with profession-
al-caliber fundamentals, the team was poised for greatness when Ben Martin
arrived for the 1958 campaign. Ben brought a vibrant, easy-going style that
resonated with the team and won wide acclaim. The entire season was one
long highlight film, with a string of last-second victories that earned us the
nickname “Cardiac Kids.” Enthusiasm was running so high that the Academy
hierarchy leased a fleet of buses to transport the Cadet Wing to the Iowa game
in Iowa City. We fought to a 13-13 tie against a machine some sports writers
named the best ever. The Falcons finished the year undefeated and went on to
play TCU to a scoreless tie in the Cotton Bowl, completing a season yet to be
matched a half-century later.

Living in relative limbo of 3rd Class year actually had a lot of appeal. I
could focus on academics and gymnastics, keep a low profile and have a fairly
calm life. Then I was issued a new roommate. Although I was still in Second
Squadron, all of the previous year’s dorm pairings had been split up. I lost Clair
and was paired with Paul Hinton, who was sharp, devoted to cadet life, and
irrepressibly enthusiastic. When reveille sounded, my bent was to lie still for
a minute and gird my mental loins for another day’s challenges. Paul bounded
instantly from his bed, urged me to roll out with him, and began a continuing
patter that left me breathless. As the semester wore on, my strong introver-
sion probably drove him to distraction, and I was struggling to keep my end of
the roommate bargain. I prayed for some resolution and lo, it came the day
before we departed for Christmas break in the form of a summons for Paul and
me from our squadron commander.

Brad Hosmer was a formidable cadet, first in his class and soon to be the
Academy’s first Rhodes Scholar. Earlier in the semester I had gone to his room
to seek help with an indecipherable problem in physics. Brad read it over,
thought for a moment and wrote down the answer, which did me absolutely
no good. What I needed to know was how he arrived at the solution, but he made it look so easy I was too embarrassed to ask. Now I was back in his presence with my roommate, anxious to know what was coming. Brad told us he had a bad situation involving two of our classmates and we were going to be part of its resolution.

Ben Briggs, nephew of the Academy Superintendent, and Bobbie Grace, a tough, quiet kid I hardly knew, were roommates living at the other end of the squadron area from Paul and me. Ben was a total misfit at the Academy. He had already completed three years of college, where he excelled in fraternity life. Ben thought the cadet system juvenile and doolie year a joke. He was forever on confinement, which included hours on the tour path, marching back and forth with his rifle. Without his three-star relative, Ben would probably not have lasted through the first summer. Even with this backstop, tolerance for his behavior was wearing thin. Bobbie readily fell under Ben’s influence. He was withdrawn, wise beyond his years, and didn’t much cotton to being the target of abuse from upperclassmen whom he did not respect. He wore his demerits like a badge of honor, a costly avenue of defiance. Hosmer’s solution was to split them up and re-pair them with Paul and me. I was ambivalent, but I sensed Paul was unnerved by this turn of events. He was a model cadet, never in trouble and was likely horrified at the prospect of moving in with either of these madmen. We drew names from a cap and I won Bobbie. Paul inherited Ben and from the look on his face I knew he suspected the worst. The new living arrangements would take effect upon our return from Christmas break. Some gift.

The months of January, February and March were known as the Dark Ages, ninety days of bitter cold and unbroken boredom. Bobbie and I settled into a relationship wherein he neither spoke a word nor even acknowledged my presence. We simply ignored each another, maintained our respective sides of the room, and lived our own lives. That was fine with me; Bobbie struck me as marginally tolerable, but no one he would ever want to hang out with.

Down the hall, things weren’t working out even that well. They were a type-cast odd couple. Ben would lie in bed smoking and reading trashy magazines, while Paul sat at his desk studying. Ben’s side of the room was right out of Animal House, while Paul’s always shone like a new dime. Try as he might, Paul could not bring him into the fold. Eventually Ben’s insouciance exceeded the fraying worth of his familial tie to the Academy, and he was dismissed. He went on to finish college, joined the real Air Force, won his pilot’s wings and died an aviator’s death.
One night in February, Bobbie departed from his studied indifference. He came over to my desk, placed his Calculus text in front of me and pointed to a problem. Deducing that he wanted help, I took a pad of paper, quietly wrote out the solution, tore off the page and handed it to him. Bobbie took it, picked up his book and went back to his desk. Our relationship had moved to a new level. A month later, at Bobbie’s instigation, it underwent a stunning transformation.

The moment he chose was Taps, on the night before our class was to embark on a two-week tour of major Air Force organizations, an eagerly awaited break that marked the end of the winter Dark Ages. As I crawled into bed, Bobbie began taping the curtains tightly together around the edge of the window frame. Then, he sealed the bottom of the door with a towel. Confident no light could escape the room, he went to our shared vanity and took out our water glasses. As I watched this little drama play out with mounting unease, Bobbie opened his side of the closet and pulled out one of his boots. His next move was near heart-stopping. He reached into the boot and brought forth a pint of Jack Daniels.

Beyond the prohibitions of the Honor Code, whose violation meant immediate dismissal, the next most serious offense according to regulations governing cadet behavior was to possess or drink liquor on the Academy grounds. The punishment was severe: one hundred demerits, six months confinement, and one hundred tours, marching back and forth with a rifle along a fixed path for an hour at a crack. Hardly believing my eyes, my shock turned to horror as Bobbie went to the vanity and filled our two glasses half full with this Devil’s drink. He picked up my glass, brought it to me bedside, and made what amounted to a toast. After three months of close observation, Bobbie opined, he had concluded that I had potential as a human being, but needed considerable training. My education would begin with the fine art of consuming illicit alcohol, a practice that he assured me was hardly unknown in the halls of the Academy’s dormitories. My choice was to join him voluntarily, or he would be pleased to force it down my gullet. Easy choice. I was actually moved by Bobbie’s words and understood this was a special moment for him and for me. We drank and sipped for a long time that night. At its conclusion, I had a splitting headache and a friend for life.

My flirtation with alcohol-inspired disaster was a one-time event, and very much out of character. I was becoming increasingly drawn into the Academy’s high-minded objectives, its black and white view of right and wrong, its orderly and predictable daily life. I was a near 4.0 student and had received my final demerit in September of 1957. I constantly weighed my words and actions.
against the Honor Code, to the extent that a minor incident just before the end of the semester burrowed into my conscience and would gnaw at me for the next two years. I also began to be plagued by stomach cramps, which would hit unexpectedly, doubling me over in pain. One such episode put me in such agony that Bobbie literally carried me to the Cadet Dispensary in the middle of the night.

As the academic year drew to a close, construction was still proceeding at a frantic pace. As I noted earlier, we had made the transition from Lowry to the permanent site despite the fact that the grounds remained a work in progress. While the major structures were complete, the campus was in many places a sea of mud, and the cadet chapel, with its seventeen unfinished spires, looked like an erector-set project gone awry. The Air Force hierarchy was determined that the first class would graduate from the gleaming glass and steel edifice designed on the drafting tables of Skidmore, Owens and Merrill. One of my enduring memories is watching fire trucks shower the chapel with torrents of water as the contractor worked desperately to find the leaks that appeared with the spring rains. Happily, the structure was made sound in time to host the first wedding of a newly minted graduate, a ceremony that made the cover of Life magazine.

2nd Classman

The departure of the Class of ’59 changed the tenor of the institution. I was especially happy to see them gone. With many notable exceptions, they were still a very odd assortment, and their unique status as the Academy’s first graduating class only compounded their oddness. Many graduated with grossly-inflated expectations about future success in the Air Force and were likely disappointed when they failed to achieve lofty rank. In contrast, the Class of ’60 was liberally populated with fair-minded, level-headed types who handled their leadership roles with greater aplomb. It was a welcome change.

The summer training program was for the first time highly enjoyable. I had a brief period of leave, returned to help train the incoming Class of ’63, and then my class was off to Europe for an extended tour through France, Germany and England. This trip was the Academy’s premier orientation program, expensive, logistically complex, and a terrific introduction to the global scope of United States military operations. The pace was measured, allowing a fair amount of leisure time. We were expected to be on our best behavior. Not a chance. Our first stop was Paris, where we arrived late in the afternoon,
checked into a nice hotel, and were turned loose for the evening. I ended up at the Crazy Horse Saloon with several companions. By the end of the last show, they had all hooked up with resident ladies of the evening and disappeared into the woodwork. I waited for them in the saloon until the night crew started stacking the chairs, then decided to take a cab back to our hotel. The scene that greeted me would have made Nero proud. Cadet bodies were strewn across the lawn, in the fountain, in the lobby, elevators and hallways. The trip was off to a grand start.

We returned to begin an academic year that was a vast improvement over the preceding two years. Bobbie and I were reassigned to 9th Squadron, and remained roommates. Our elevated military standing earned us successively the position of squadron senior cadet NCO in the fall and spring semesters. Bobbie’s grades ticked up and mine stayed generally high, the exception being a ‘C’ in Thermodynamics, a subject I found utterly mystifying. I also survived Electrical Engineering despite decimating a lab station trying to construct a wire-wound three-phase squirrel-cage induction motor. My trampoline skills continued to improve, and I earned a third letter. Now in our junior year, our class was accorded more time away from the Academy grounds. Since cadets were not allowed to have automobiles, taking advantage of that privilege required finding a girlfriend with a car.

That pursuit was facilitated by Mrs. Gail McComas, the Cadet Wing hostess. The widow of an Air Force officer, Gail was perfectly suited to her duties of teaching cadets social graces, staging dances and other get-togethers with young ladies from the community. Her inviting office in Arnold Hall, the Academy social center, was a favorite hangout for cadets; Gail listened to their sad stories, dispensed advice and built romantic liaisons. I dated periodically but not very seriously. Most of my weekends were spent in the movie theater, bowling alley, or pool room, where Bobbie taught me how to use a cue. He was masterful, and I never came close to beating him.

Spring break was allotted to a two-week individual sojourn with an active Air Force combat unit. I was assigned to an F-102 air defense interceptor squadron, based on the outskirts of Kansas City. Its mission was to sit alert, prepared to intercept an unknown or a hostile aircraft on a moment’s notice. The highpoint of my apprenticeship was a ride in the training version of the airplane. Otherwise, I found the duty tedious and unappealing. The pilots sat around the alert facility drinking coffee, playing pool or otherwise idling away the hours. When they were launched, it was invariably because of some civilian aircraft off course or with a bum radio. I did find some appealing companionship in the person of a classmate’s sister, who lived in the city and took her
brother’s word that I would be a tolerable date. Our several evenings together salvaged an otherwise boring experience, one that would greatly influence my choice of assignments after pilot training two years hence.

1st Classman

June Week arrived, the Class of ’60 departed, and I moved up to the exalted status of Cadet 1st Class. I was about to embark on the most challenging and rewarding year of my young life, although in the early weeks of summer there was no hint of what the next twelve months would bring. To the contrary, August ended on a near disastrous note.

June and July were devoted to training the incoming Class of 1964, the most important responsibility of the new senior class. I was assigned as one of three flight commanders in a summer squadron, with the rank of cadet major. I had under my purview a small cadre of other classmates, a few members of the Class of ’62, and some thirty Basic Cadets. This was my first opportunity to affect how training was conducted and, within the limits of my rank, I laid down the law. No hazing, no insulting or profane language, no excessive physical exercise as punishment. Treat the Basics with respect. Meet their expectations of a tough, demanding program through superior leadership. Be a role model, not an agent of fear. There was some risk in this drastic departure from the norm, but I decided it was outweighed by the benefits. While my staff signed on, there was no guarantee that those who would replace us in a month would buy in. Indeed, the odds were very much against it. I hoped that by that point the new cadets would be well enough grounded, physically and emotionally, to weather the transition.

I relished this leadership opportunity. The Class of ’64 proved exceptional from the moment they walked through the gates, a promise borne out by their later performance in the Air Force. To my mind, they may be the best the Academy has ever produced. I was with them every waking hour, from Reveille to Taps, carefully assessing progress, morale and staff leadership. As far as I knew, this might be my first and last chance at meaningful leadership and I wanted to make the most of it. I had no idea what my rank or position might be in the coming academic year, and the modest role of flight commander did not augur very well.

Although the days were long, I was also engaged in a physical regimen to prepare for what August held: Army airborne school in Fort Benning, Georgia. The Academy had arranged an opportunity for any upperclassman willing to
forego his summer leave to attend parachute training with our sister service. I, well, jumped at the chance. Every night after bedding down the Basics, I grabbed my rifle and set out on a five-mile run in fatigues, helmet and combat boots. At 7,200 feet that builds stamina and strength in a hurry. I used to smile with quiet satisfaction at the end of the run, remembering the exhausted Basic Cadet who three years earlier had to be dragged the last few yards after bayonet training.

The extra effort paid off. Although August in Georgia is one-hundred degree Hell, I did well enough to earn the runner-up rank for Distinguished Graduate. The long runs were relatively easy and the instructors were astonished at my speed on the climbing rope – not knowing that this was my second specialty as a varsity gymnast. Two weeks of preparatory training flew by. I spent the few free hours at the officers’ club pool, which led to a chance meeting with a very attractive young lady who, astonishingly, had been a W-L High School classmate. In high school, she and her boyfriend were inseparable, but her Army father’s reassignment to Fort Benning had ended the relationship. We became romantically involved for what I thought would be a brief summer interlude. She would later resurface in my life armed with a much more serious intent.

We spent a restless final weekend waiting for Monday’s first jump from an aircraft. Ten of us were herded into each of five C-123 aircraft, outfitted with our primary and backup chutes, and flown to the nearby drop zone. By protocol, being the lightest, I was first out the door. I felt the wind stream snatch my body, and at the end of my three-count the main canopy snapped open. Amazing. The scene from 1200 feet was breathtaking and the silence surreal. Despite my position as first out, I was the last down, finding a rock in the sandy field that left an ugly bruise on my right thigh. Badge of honor. Four days later, we made our final jump, in full combat gear, with rifle, and were awarded our jump wings. I was proud of my performance. I left Fort Benning thankful for what I thought would be a one-time experience with parachuting. Wrong. Twice over.

When I returned to my room to pack after the graduation ceremony, I received some disquieting news. The military plane scheduled to pick us up for return to the Academy had not shown up. It was nonetheless our responsibility to get back on time, i.e., by midnight that night, or face the consequences, which for signing in late would be severe. After a mad scramble, three friends and I caught a commercial flight that got us to Denver at 11:00 p.m. One of my companions had called a friend to meet us, and we made a tear for the Academy, an hour south. No way could we make it on time. I signed in thirty
minutes late and glumly searched out my room in my new unit, 13th Squadron. At that time of night, my new roommate was sound asleep. I put my bag down quietly and went over to my desk where lay a note addressed to “Cadet Lieutenant Colonel Lee Butler.” It was from the squadron Air Officer Commanding, Major William A. Patch, an Army officer participating in an AFA-West Point exchange program. Patch informed me that I was his choice for cadet squadron commander. He then laid out a list of things he wanted done and me to brief him on in his office, at 7:00 a.m. I spent the rest of the night working through his tasks, as well as laying out my goals, policies and leadership principles. My heart was heavy, because I knew my tenure would be short-lived, given my late return. Nonetheless, I reported to Patch at the appointed hour with homework in hand.

Patch was a robust man of medium build, with close-cropped hair and a confident, outgoing demeanor. The son of an Army general who had been a hero of World War II, this Patch was himself seasoned by leading ground-combat troops in Korea. He understood perfectly his role as 13th Squadron’s supervisor, as opposed to many of his colleagues, who distrusted cadets and therefore kept them on a short leash, thus greatly circumscribing their charges’ opportunity to learn by leading. Conversely, Patch expected us to run the squadron. He fully concurred with my approach to leadership, and agreed with my key goal, which was to be the outstanding unit, or Honor Squadron, at year’s end. I had laid out for him the selection criteria and a detailed strategy to maximize our performance in each category. As the discussion ended, Patch asked if I had anything to add. I said, “Yes, I signed in late last night.” Without turning a hair, he asked for the circumstances. When I finished, he said he was proud of me for going to jump school (I knew from the wings on his chest he had as well). The absent airplane was beyond my control, and I had recovered well. Matter closed. I had found the leader of my dreams.

The final year of my Academy experience became a template for my Air Force career. After long preparation, most of it arduous, physically challenging and emotionally trying, I arrived at a point at which my knowledge, skills, and mental and physical toughness paid enormous dividends. I set out to make 13th Squadron the embodiment of everything I believed about what the Academy should be and how training should be conducted. Hazing was a cardinal sin. Everyone would be treated with dignity and respect. The fourth classmen would be the wellspring of energy and enthusiasm. We would lead them by example. The goal was Honor Squadron, everyone would have a part in achieving it, and we would measure our progress weekly. I held a squadron meeting every night just before Taps to review the day, control rumors,
praise accomplishment, get feedback and check morale. I was in my element as a leader and loved every minute of it. We became the repository for fourth classmen having difficulty in other squadrons and salvaged every one of them, including a huge black lad, one of the first at the Academy, who came to us totally demoralized. We made him into a star. We were all stars.

In each of the four classes making up 13th Squadron we had cadets who finished at or near the top of their class, including, in my class, John Daniel Sullivan, Jr., a droll, taciturn genius from Worcester, Massachusetts. I came to appreciate John’s stellar academic capability in any number of classrooms we shared over the years. Class sizes were small, typically about twenty, each called a “section.” For each subject, the several sections were populated according to individual cadet proficiency in the material. John was nearly always the first man in the first section and I was frequently the last man in that section. He mastered every discipline with ease. I did fine in most subjects, but sweated bullets in Astronautics, where John was my savior. He was also a taskmaster. I will never forget racing back to his room after a difficult exam for which he had tutored me extensively the night before. Breathlessly announcing that I had scored 95%, my excitement wilted when John gave me an annoyed look and asked, “What did you screw up?” It would not be the last time John saved me from impending failure.

The academic day comprised seven class periods, of which five were filled with mandatory courses. Although it was not required, I filled all seven, two with electives. I was also vice president of the Cadet Forum on Public Affairs, part of a national program that sponsored college-level study and symposia on public policy issues. My gymnastic skills had greatly improved, thanks to a new teammate in the Class of ’64 named Jim Weaver. Jim had been a star high school trampolinist. Despite his status as a 4th Classman, he became a close friend and indeed, my coach, raising my trampoline skills to new, ahem, heights. Under his tutelage, I even perfected a triple back somersault, although the first time I attempted it without the safety belt I nearly killed myself. I landed just short of three full rotations, and was launched into low earth orbit. Our coach, Lieutenant Tanaka, saved my neck, plucking me from mid-air just past the pommel horse, several yards from the trampoline.

I was still plagued with stomach pains, but had become more adept at dealing with them. At this juncture, I didn’t want to do anything that might jeopardize my chance to go to pilot training. I knew my plate was full, but I was seized with a desire to squeeze every ounce of opportunity from my Academy years. I had been singled out by the Dean of Faculty, Brigadier General McDermott, a young and highly regarded officer who had been brought to the Academy from
Air Force Academy Cadet (1957 – 1961)

West Point to create a program of unparalleled excellence. He did precisely that, introducing a majors-for-all curriculum that earned accreditation prior to the first class graduating, a remarkable achievement. “McD,” as he was known, brought me into his inner circle, calling me to his office at odd hours to get insights into cadet life and behavior. He introduced me to visionary thinking, looking outside the box, rejecting conventional wisdom and embracing strategic change. His experience also taught me the consequences that follow when competing visions collide.

General McDermott made me a Rhodes Scholar candidate, which meant more long hours of preparation for the selection process. I would compete from Mississippi, my home state. A number of other classmates were entered into the competition, including John Sullivan, whom I considered a shoo-in and who ultimately was. My experience was entirely different.

I left for Jackson a week before the end of the fall semester and would not be back until after Christmas break. My parents had arranged for me to stay at the home of longstanding family friends who were pillars of the Jackson community, he being a noted physician and head of the state psychiatric examining board. I arrived on a Saturday, and the three of us spent a lovely weekend deepening a friendship I had not been much involved in as a child. On Monday, I donned my carefully pressed uniform and reported to the Rhodes evaluation committee. They seemed pleased to have an Air Force Academy cadet in the mix, liked what I had to say, and selected me as one of two state candidates to compete in the regional finals in New Orleans on Wednesday. I relayed the news to General McDermott and my parents, and then went back to my friend’s home for a celebratory dinner. A happy setting, fated to be short-lived.

After the meal, we repaired to the living room for a bit of brandy and small talk before bed. As the evening wore on, the good doctor’s wife got pretty heavily into the bottle and, without warning, the conversation took a bad turn. Out of the blue, she asked, “Are there any niggers at your school?” I was dumbfounded. My innate childhood racism had long been erased by my years in Virginia and at the Academy. Her pejorative label hit me like a slap in the face, shocking and unexpected. I collected myself and replied that we in fact did have black cadets, who did as well as whites. The term “black” got her blood boiling as she sensed it, correctly, as a respectful term. She went off on “niggers” being in such a high quality school, and then it came. The killer question. “Lee,” she asked, “if you marry and have a daughter, would you let her marry a ‘nigger’?” Clinching my teeth, I said, “If I am fortunate enough to have a daughter, I will trust her judgment regarding her choice of husbands; race won’t enter into the equation.”
That reply triggered an emotional meltdown. She stood up, shrieked, “Oh, my God!” at the top of her lungs, and fell to the floor in a dead faint. Without a word, the doctor bent down, scooped her up in his arms, turned off the lights and left the room, leaving me to sit alone in total darkness. It was nearly 2:00 a.m., and the weather had turned frightful with rain and sleet. After some reflection, I concluded I could not stay in their home a minute longer. I called a hotel in downtown Jackson and reserved a room. I called a cab, packed my few belongings, wrote a cryptic thank-you note, transited to the hotel, and spent a short, sleepless, miserable night.

Events at the New Orleans’ Regional ran straight downhill. The room was full of Deep South candidates, who were all bubbly and brilliant. I was exhausted and emotionally wrung out, not that it much mattered; the questions from the dozen judges arrayed around the examining table were mostly over my head. The clincher came from a physics professor from North Texas State, who demanded imperiously that I recount the course of thinking about general relativity since it was first propounded by Einstein. I was unveiled as an intellectual imposter. It was the state dairy cattle judging contest all over again. Happily, for him and for our home state, my fellow Mississippian was selected to go to Oxford. I was mortified, although my spirits were lifted when I reported the outcome to the Academy. McDermott assured me that selection for the regional competition was itself viewed as a great success, and that he would push for my return the following year as an active-duty Air Force candidate. I was not thrilled by the idea.

After I returned to the Academy in early January of 1961, the depressing Dark Ages of deep winter were punctuated by a trip to Washington, D.C., where the entire cadet wing had been designated to march in the Inaugural parade honoring newly elected President John F. Kennedy. This cross-country adventure began on a note of mass confusion, as a major winter storm was blanketing much of the East Coast as we were en route to Andrews AFB, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. The storm forced the armada of C-130s transporting us to split up, diverting to several alternate bases, some located several hundred miles from the nation’s capital. Fortunately, my plane and a handful of others found safe haven at Langley AFB, in southern Virginia, close enough to get to D.C. in time for the parade. Some three hundred of us, after spending the night at the base and in Annapolis, piled onto buses early the next morning for a three-hour ride to our assigned location in the parade queue. As it turned out, we were the only Air Force Academy cadets to make it, enough to form only three squadrons, with me in command of the lead unit. Mountains of snow stretched as far as the eye could see. The air was
frigid, but the brilliant sun generated just enough heat to turn the icy streets to slush, making the march difficult and in spots, treacherous. Indeed, it produced a moment I will never forget. Approaching the Presidential reviewing stand, as I gave my squadron the command, “Eyes left,” I saw mired in the goop just ahead of me an overshoe with the street shoe it protected still inside. Some poor Midshipman in the Naval Academy contingent preceding us was in a world of hurt.

The semester began to speed by, thanks largely to my frequent trips away from the Academy. These several absences were due for the most part to gymnastics season, which was in full swing. Not only did my sport spare me from much of the daily grind of cadet life, it was responsible for a life-changing event: I was about to meet my future bride. In mid-March, the 18th to be exact, the gymnastic team climbed aboard an Academy T-29 navigation trainer, one of a fleet based at Lowry, and headed for Los Angeles State College to compete in the West Coast Amateur Athletic Union regional championships. We were one of several dozen teams participating, and this was a chance to test ourselves against some of the best the nation had to offer. We arrived at the campus in early afternoon, and were on the gym floor by three o’clock for our assigned warm-up period. Jim and I reported to the trampoline to test the bed and run through my routine. I jumped on first and began a series of back somersaults, using the door at the far end of the gym to maintain orientation as I inverted at the top of each rotation. On the third time over, suspended for a split-second upside down above the tramp, my eyes focused on the doorway, a Southern California vision stepped through the opening. She was tall, blonde, and drop-dead gorgeous.

I landed, jumped down from the tramp, turned it over to Jim, and began to reconnoiter the gym in search of my fleeting vision. I found her within minutes, and edged closer for a short-range confirmation of my split-second assessment. She was breathtaking. I watched her for a moment, engaged in an animated conversation, pony tail swinging rhythmically as she tossed her head. Electric personality, dazzling smile, she was the whole package. Looking for an opening, I spotted her arm band identifying her as a “hostess.” The role of a hostess, I mused, is to help participants with problems, so I needed a problem. I ran down to the locker room and created one.

Slipping out of my competition shorts and into my sweat suit pants, I cut a few threads and then ripped the top button off the shorts. Big problem, since I was due up for the preliminary round of competition in three hours. This, I thought, had better work. Back upstairs, I found her again. With shorts in one hand and the button in the other, I walked over and interrupted her
conversation by tugging gently on her armband-adorned sleeve. She was wearing high heels and I was clad in my competition slippers, giving her a height advantage of about two inches. She stopped in mid-sentence, looked left and then down, and said, “Well, hello.” I said, “I’m Cadet Lee Butler and I have a problem.” The cadet part didn’t seem to make an impression, but at least she inquired as to my difficulty. I said, “I am here to compete on the trampoline, in fact in just three hours, and this button seems to have come off my shorts.” Obliged by the Honor Code, I was very careful about this phrasing, which I decided was true enough in light of my vital mission.

She failed to take the bait. Quizzically, she asked, “What does that have to do with me?” I stammered something about arm band, hostess, problem solver. She replied, “But I don’t sew.” Now desperate, I proposed that perhaps she knew an LA State trainer who might do the job. At that point, she took mercy, shorts and button and set out to solve my problem. After some time, it occurred to me that she might not come back at all, but just as that chilling scenario was taking hold, she reappeared, the repaired shorts in hand. More importantly, I noticed she was now wearing flats. She handed over the goods and introduced herself as Dorene Nunley, a junior majoring in physical education. I thanked her profusely, said I hoped to see her later and returned elated to the locker room for another change of pants. Mission accomplished. Or at least underway. There was more to be done.

The preliminary round went well, and both Jim and I advanced to Saturday night’s final. As we took the floor, my heart leaped. There, sitting beside the head trampoline judge, was Dorene, tote board in hand for registering and displaying the scores rendered by the judge. Her presence inspired me, and must have distracted my competition who, including Jim, did not have their best night. Dorene tells me that I won the event, although I honestly don’t remember. My focus was on figuring out how to translate my trampoline prowess into a date with Miss Dorene Nunley when the event closed around 8:00 p.m.

There were at least three things standing in the way of this aspiration. First, she might already have a date. Second, she might not be interested. Third, and much more problematic, she might not like the idea that our date couldn’t begin until after I completed an obligation, made by our coaches, for the team seniors to go out with girls from the UCLA “Angel Flight,” a group of lovelies affiliated with that university’s ROTC unit. When I broached the invitation, she did have a date, but decided to postpone it with a phone call. When she returned, I revealed the little problem about my prior obligation. Not surprisingly, she was highly indignant over the prospect of cooling her heels for some indeterminate period while I entertained my assigned date. I needed
help fast. It came in the form of her close friend, Judy Calzada, whom Dorene had enlisted as a chaperone, and who was keen to have Jim double-date with us should things work out.

After a long, tense side-bar conversation, Dorene and Judy returned to announce they would buy into this bizarre arrangement, but that if they found a better offer at the local dance being staged for the competitors that night, we would have seen the last of them. That was good enough for me. Jim and I met our blind dates, jumped into the back seat of their car and were off to a nearby restaurant for what we hoped would be a quick dinner and rapid return. The chances of that took a fortunate turn when the young ladies announced they were bound by a curfew and had to be back at their dorm by 10:00 p.m.

We proceeded to have a grand time, chattering away through the salad course. Then the hammer fell. My companion blithely observed that the curfew business was just a ploy in case the evening turned boring. They were actually free until dawn, so let’s party. I blanched, kicked Jim under the table and asked if we could be excused for a moment. We went to the men’s room where I laid out a plan. Jim, I said, we made this date in good faith and just got conned. My take is that we are obligated to make our next commitment and I am about to create the conditions for that to happen. When we get back to the table, I am going to order scallops, which are guaranteed to make me sick. They have since childhood, when my father forced me to eat them. Your job is to be distressed and get me back to the hotel ASAP. It was an Oscar-winning performance. I ate, threw up, Jim paled, as did both girls. We raced back to campus, bailed out and Jim searched for Judy and Dorene, while I went to the bathroom to clean up. When I found Jim, he reported that one of the team’s 3rd Classmen, Ron Kos, was making a move on Dorene. I found Kos, explained the military facts of rank and life, and he retired from the field. Date number two was a go, and off we went in Judy’s car. The chemistry was grand, the night too short. I was in love.

Back at the Academy, the year ended on a high note. We won the Honor Squadron competition by a wide margin, the only blemish coming in unit marching, which was probably my fault, as I had an occasional tendency to get a hair off beat. My senior NCO, Howard ‘Fish’ Nichols, had the duty of informing me when that happened. He never understood why, rather than adjusting my cadence, I would have the entire squadron change step. My explanation – that the commander was never out of step – only increased his irritation. I completed my four years of academic work with a 3.85 GPA which, when integrated with my military training scores, placed me twelfth in my class, now numbering 217 graduates. Number eleven was my roommate, Oleg
Komarnitsky, who now became, as we approached graduation, a central figure in my most anxious moment as a cadet.

The incident that had occurred in the spring of my 3rd Class year was never far from the front of my mind. I became increasingly troubled that, while serving an evening dorm duty dubbed “Cadet in Charge of Quarters,” I had signed my name to an incorrect “End of CCQ Tour Report.” One of my responsibilities was to ensure that any cadet out of his room during the mandatory in-quarters period, between dinner and a brief period before Taps, was challenged with the question, “All right, sir”? An affirmative reply confirmed the cadet was engaged in an activity that authorized him to be absent from his room. As I walked the halls of the squadron area I caught a glimpse of someone. As he turned out of sight at the corner of the far end of the corridor, I called out, “All right, sir?” but there was no reply. Not knowing who the person was, I elected to file my report with the “No incident” block checked. As time went by, my concern grew that I had knowingly submitted a false report by rationalizing that I could not have known whom I saw, whether it was a cadet, officer or some visitor who had no idea I might have been calling out to him.

Finally, the night before June Week, my last seven days at the Academy, I decided I did not want to graduate with this issue unresolved. After Taps, I approached my roommate, who was one of our class honor representatives, and related my story. He listened carefully, made notes and left to call an impromptu meeting of the Honor Board. After what seemed an eternity, he returned and related, rather matter-of-factly, that the representatives did not consider my action a violation of the Code. Case closed. My stress level was so high I was awake till dawn. I reflected endlessly on whether my respect for the vow I had taken, and for the many cadets who had voluntarily turned themselves in for a violation knowing they would surely be dismissed, had led me to develop a hypersensitive sense of integrity. I concluded that I was who I was, and that it was far better to err on the side of worrying too much rather than too little about such matters. That was a momentous conclusion, one that over the next thirty years would thrust me time and again into career-threatening confrontations. In the final analysis, despite the emotional and physical toll, it was the right decision, certainly for the values that defined my character and informed my sense of duty to God and country.

Other than graduation itself, the highlight of June Week was the banquet recognizing the Honor Squadron, held at nearby Ent Air Force Base, and hosted by the Air Force Association, a collegial organization whose members support the advance of air and space power. The Association comprises an eclectic mix of active, retired, and separated Air Force members, plus a large contingent
of civilians who might never have served, but who love aviation. Many of the latter belonged to the powerful defense industry that supports the ends of air power, staying tightly connected to the Air Force and underpinning its objectives in a variety of ways, from lobbying to putting on elaborate awards events. Ours was truly stellar, bringing in two of America’s best-known figures, General Curtis LeMay, soon to be Air Force Chief of Staff, and television personality Arthur Godfrey, a close friend of LeMay and well-known aviation aficionado.

The evening began with photograph sessions in the officers’ club lobby. After several group shots, the photographer posed General LeMay and me in front of the fireplace. It is a picture I treasure, one that came to have historical import: the man who built Strategic Air Command into the world’s premier military organization standing side-by-side with the cadet who would thirty-one years later, almost to the day, retire it from service. Alpha and Omega. Priceless.

Dinner was highly entertaining in every respect. The setting, the meal and the music were all first-rate. I was seated at the head table between LeMay and Godfrey, the former uttering not a single word, the latter regaling me with amusing and charming stories about his stint as an able-bodied seaman in the United States Navy. Godfrey loved cigars and went through several in the course of the evening. When he exhausted his supply, he told me to get him one from General LeMay, a daunting request in light of the general’s disposition. He grunted at my request, pulled a cigar from his inside breast pocket and handed it over without a word or even a look.

I was the last speaker on the program, after LeMay and Godfrey. I have no recollection of LeMay’s remarks, but Godfrey’s comments were very endearing. As I stood to take the podium, I saw a lone figure enter the room from a door at the rear. It was my father. He and my mother had just arrived after a long drive from Virginia. I immediately recalled my image of him four years earlier, running toward the boat dock in Philadelphia, waving the telegram announcing my appointment to the Academy. His evident pride had put a small cornerstone in place toward rebuilding our relationship. His commitment to make the banquet added another. I was glad to see him.

At the close of my remarks, I was seized by an inspiration akin to the impulse that led me to pick up pennies from the gym floor at W-L High School. Sitting in front of each cadet’s plate that night were a pair of silver cuff links, one emblazoned with our squadron crest, the other with the Association seal. It was a very special memento. I concluded by thanking Arthur Godfrey, then reached over, picked up my silver cuff links, and presented them to him as a gift from me and from 13th Squadron. He was moved to tears. That summer,
when I returned to Virginia, there was a small package waiting. It was from Godfrey. Inside I found a pair of solid gold cufflinks from Tiffany, exact replicas of the pair I had given him. The note said, “For the troops silver; for the commander, gold.”

The graduation ceremony was held on the parade ground. June 7th, 1961, dawned bright and beautiful, with skies crystal clear and temperature perfect, a stroke of fortune in an area where thunderstorms and even snow are not unknown at that time of year. We assembled in front of the bleachers, filled with an assortment of proud parents, siblings, girlfriends, press, and Academy staff. The cadet wing marched in review, the band played a stirring program and then it was time to put an end to four life-changing years. The hierarchy mounted the stage, the Secretary of the Air Force spoke and then awarded diplomas. Beginning with John Daniel Sullivan, Jr., the announcer intoned the names of the first eleven cadets – the top 5% of the class – and their designation as Distinguished Graduates. Next came George Lee Butler and a pregnant pause. Reminiscent of my W-L class standing, I was the leader of the long blue line of non-distinguished graduates.

We returned to the squadron area and changed into our spanking new Air Force uniforms. My father and Major Patch pinned on my gold 2nd lieutenant bars, and my mother pinned on my navigator wings. I was now officially back at the bottom of the Totem Pole, from senior cadet to Air Force butter-bar. The road ahead looked very long. The first stop would be pilot training at Williams Air Force Base, an Air Training Command (ATC) base, outside Phoenix, Arizona, after eight glorious weeks of leave. I had only a rudimentary plan in mind. The adventure would begin with a road trip in my 1955 MGA convertible, a graduation gift from my parents, to Norwalk, California, home to the Southern California gymnastics hostess who had fixed my problem and won my heart. It would have been better, of course, if I had bothered to tell her I was coming. My manners had not improved since I had first asked her out.

Looking back on the young 2nd lieutenant driving out the Academy gate, I would have to admit that I was not very well prepared for the real Air Force. It was nothing like the Academy, not as professional, not as disciplined, and certainly not underpinned by the same commitment to integrity. I had become Super Cadet over the course of my four years, evolving from a physically and emotionally frail Basic to a confident and accomplished 1st Classman. I had become disciplined and demanding to the point that I put one of my classmates, a giant of a man, on confinement at the beginning of June Week, for signing in late from an evening off-base.

Perhaps the most pointed evidence of my total buy-in to the Academy
mission came at the outset of our senior year. I sent an open letter to my classmates, chastising them for falling off the pace as graduation approached, tarnishing, in my estimation, our reputation as a group of achievers. My trusted friend and confidant, Hector Negroni, the Class of 1961 unofficial archivist and keeper of our collective conscience, actually retained a copy in his voluminous files. In retrospect, the letter was no doubt bold, but that is who I was and where I was at the time: devoted to excellence, uncompromisingly honorable, sternly judgmental and determined to succeed in my chosen profession. I was a competent speaker and writer, and an entry-level leader. I would also have to say, in all candor, that I was not much fun.
Chapter 7

Student Pilot (1961 – 1962)

I took the southern route to Los Angeles, overnighting at the Grand Canyon and finally reaching the L.A. Basin, where I arrived just at dusk without a real fix on my destination. Dorene and I had written each other a few times, so I had an address, but that was no help when I suddenly found myself immersed in rush hour traffic on State Route 91. In my little convertible, I felt like an ant on a log plunging through rapids. When the 91 terminated, I bailed out onto an exit and stopped for the night at the first motel I saw. The next morning, I finally got a decent map, found Norwalk to be not far away and set off to find Dorene. I located the little house that answered to her address, parked and knocked on the door. Dorene wasn’t home but her friend Sharon Fitch answered the door. She was obviously not expecting to see me, and said that Dorene didn’t tell her I was coming to visit. “Well,” I said, “I meant this to be a surprise.” “That,” Sharon replied, “it will surely be, especially since her parents are in Texas, she works at Disneyland every day and has a very busy social life, not to mention a boyfriend or two.” None of this was welcome news. I had planned on staying with Dorene, never thought about her having a job much less boyfriends, and with her parents gone, staying at her house might not be an option. After Sharon left, I awaited Dorene’s late afternoon arrival with growing unease.

My car at the curb suggested company, but I was probably the last person she expected to see. She greeted me with affection and did a good job of concealing her consternation at this turn of events. We talked about my staying there with her folks gone. Although we were both adults there was an issue of propriety, which we left for her older brother Jim to settle. Jim asked about my background which struck him as acceptable and he said he was comfortable with the idea. I got my things from the car and moved in, slept on the let-down sofa, and spent my days at Disneyland waiting for Dorene to finish work. Happily, she set me up with passes to all the rides. Come quitting time, we would dance well into the evening at one of the pavilions. The fact that we
both liked to dance went a long way toward cementing our relationship. I was adequate and Dorene was of near professional caliber, given her natural ability and years of lessons going back to early childhood.

One morning her car was out of sorts, so I took her to work and drove back to the house. I walked through the front door like I owned the place and was greeted by a gruff voice emanating from the easy-chair centered on the wall facing the door. “Who,” it inquired, “the hell are you?” Dorene’s parents, James Oran (reduced to J.O., as one could imagine) and Veda, had returned. I was caught completely off guard. “I’m Lee Butler, a friend of Dorene’s,” I stammered, to which J.O. responded, “Where’d she find you, under a rock?” With his thick glasses and west Texas demeanor, J.O. Nunley was as endearing as a cactus. I knew I was in the presence of trouble. Hearing Veda in the kitchen, I excused myself to go and meet her. It was filial love at first sight. There stood Aunt Sister reincarnate. Her face lit up with a sweet Irish smile and she said Dorene had told her all about me. I felt instantly welcome and wanted. I sat down and we talked for a long time about Dorene and the family. Veda was making a pecan pie, my favorite. The dinner that evening was chicken and dumplings and black-eyed peas, which I could eat by the bucketful. I had died and gone to culinary heaven.

After a week with Dorene, I made a quick trip home, and drove back for a final few days with this lady who had now completely won my heart. In a fit of romance, I scheduled an evening of dinner and dancing at the officers’ club at March AFB, near Riverside. This would be my first visit to an Air Force installation since my commissioning, so I proudly wore my uniform, gold 2nd lieutenant bars gleaming. As we approached the gate in the MGA, top down, Dorene dazzling, I donned my cap and prepared to receive a salute from the young security policeman standing at the ready. He dutifully raised his right hand to eye level, but before I could fully return the salute he suddenly shouted, “Dorene, baby!” and rushed around to her side of the car for a hug from his college friend, me now a complete afterthought. As I began mulling over a proper reprimand, it occurred to me that he was simply mirroring my own infatuation with the woman who in the space of a year would become my life’s companion.

Two days later, I left for Phoenix and Williams Air Force Base, nicknamed Willie, in the suburb of Chandler. I was about to report to my first duty station and undertake fifty-five weeks of pilot training, a vital step for an aspiring young officer in a military service where the pilot was king. Slots at the several training bases scattered across the southern United States were allocated by class rank; standing number twelve of 217 grads, I had my choice. I took
Willie due to its reputation as the best base in terms of location and diversions. Thus, the twenty slots available at Willie, for Class 63-B, slated to start in mid-August, were largely snapped up by the brightest of my very smart classmates. That meant the competition for end-of-course ranking, and the associated opportunity to choose the most desirable operational assignment, would be fierce. Adding fuel to that competitive fire were the other twenty members of Class 63-B, who came from several other schools, including West Point and Annapolis grads who had transferred their loyalties to the Air Force.

I would soon learn that an Air Force Academy diploma was no guarantee of success in the real Air Force. To the contrary, I encountered for the first time a strain of resentment from fellow officers convinced that we golden-boy graduates would get preferential treatment by promotion boards, unfairly leaving the second-class citizens from ROTC and Officer Training School in our dust. I was shocked but understood their concern and quickly came to admire my colleagues from civilian schools. After a few years of living with preconceived notions about my status as an Academy grad, I would stop wearing my ring, determined that my contemporaries and seniors learn to accept and to respect me for my character and talents rather than the source of my commission.

Willie sat in a desert environment, ideal for flying training because the weather is hardly ever a factor. The downside is the intense summer heat, which turns the aircraft skin burning-hot and cockpits into ovens until the air conditioning kicks in. We were assigned to two-story cinderblock dorms, two students to a suite encompassing a living room, bath and separate bedrooms. Classrooms, the mess hall and officers’ club were all within walking distance from the dorms, and the flight line was a short drive. I paired up with John Sullivan, who proved a great choice. Over the course of the next year we would each play a critical role in salvaging each other’s flying careers.

We proved to be a pretty special class, a motivated bunch of mostly high achievers who got along well and were fun to be with. I was particularly struck by Jerry Siegel and Dick Knoblock, Cal Tech and West Point graduates respectively. Jerry was over-the-top brilliant, in a laid back, laconic sort of way. Dick was Steve Canyon personified, smart and a terrific athlete. The three of us hit it off immediately, and we were soon engaged in an unauthorized travel conspiracy that could have readily gotten us kicked out of the program. As fate would have it, Dick was engaged to a Pasadena beauty who was a former Rose Bowl Queen. Within days after meeting each other, we struck a pact to drive to Los Angeles every other weekend to visit our sweethearts. Jerry, a party guy, would come along to visit his Cal Tech friends. We would take turns at the wheel for the four-hundred-mile trip, departing after last duty on Fridays, then
driving through the night on Sundays to arrive back at the base before first light. It was a very neat arrangement. It was also cosmically stupid, since we were effectively AWOL; the travel limit for students was one hundred miles. The only explanation for this highly risky behavior was, of course, that we were in love.

The training program was divided into a Primary Phase, devoted to learning essential piloting skills in a small trainer designated the T-37, and a Basic Phase flying the larger and more powerful T-33. The former aircraft, with its side-by-side seats, was relatively new, the latter a vintage machine with tandem seating that pre-dated the Korean War. On a typical day, we would begin with morning academics, then head for the flight line after lunch. Like most Air Force training programs, ours included a healthy slice of physical exercise, with a mandatory regimen of sit-ups, pull-ups, and a six-hundred-yard shuttle run, each category requiring a minimum standard of performance.

Our final standing in the program would be determined by integrating our scores in flying, academics and physical training. I was quite confident in my capabilities on the athletic field and in the classroom. Flying was an unknown, my only previous exposure having come during a two-week stint at a training base in Florida the summer after my 4th Class year at the Academy. All of the flight instructors in that program were civilians, and I didn’t care for mine. He took great delight in trying to make me sick with endless spins before I was acclimated to flying the airplane. At Willie, by contrast, the cadre was all-military. I was, therefore, hoping for something better this round. Not a chance.

When the Air Force issued personalities, it badly shortchanged my instructor. Expressionless face, flat voice, zero enthusiasm. He made flying a stressful grind. His hapless students were always atop the Boner Board, a public record of airborne screw-ups for which the instructor pilot, or IP, was allowed to exact a monetary penalty of one dollar each, the cash going to the unit fund. I hated the whole idea, public humiliation, the dent in my meager 2nd lieutenant’s pay and the tension it added to an already demanding program. My instructor delighted in humbling his students, even challenging them to play chess with him while he was blindfolded. The prospect of spending six months with this guy was draining my enthusiasm for the program. Suddenly, relief came in the most unexpected form.

If there was anyone in a more unhappy relationship with his instructor than me, it was John Sullivan and his IP, Captain Jim Kaneski, who never should have been placed in that role. Jim was a fighter pilot involuntarily reassigned from an F-86 fighter outfit on Okinawa. He hated his job, did not like students, and made no bones about it. He and John were fire and water, their mutual
dislike very evident, a contest of wills that John was clearly going to lose. The stage was set for another Solomon solution of split-the-roommates, except this time it was swap instructors. I came into the flight room one morning about a month into the program to find my name plate at Kaneski’s table and John’s at my former seat. Hallelujah. Things immediately turned around for both of us. John loved matching wits with his new IP, and Kaneski discovered I learned faster the less instruction he gave. While John and my former nemesis were playing mind games, Kaneski was teaching me aerial combat maneuvers, an entirely unauthorized activity that advanced my flying skills much more rapidly than the authorized syllabus.

When time came for my first in-flight evaluation, after 30 hours of instruction, Kaneski sent me aloft with high expectations. After a thorough preflight briefing with the “check pilot” who would put me through the paces, we were off on an early morning launch. I was on fire, nailed every maneuver, and began my let-down from acrobatics altitude to begin the touch-and-go landing phase at an auxiliary field about twenty miles from the main base. I called the tower to request entry into the landing pattern, set up my approach and greased a perfect landing. I added power to gain speed for lift-off and a second pattern, and at 100 knots eased the nose up and raised the gear. The check pilot immediately took the controls, said, “I have the airplane,” and initiated a climbing turn to pass directly in front of the tower where he called and asked for a visual check of the belly. Getting an “all-clean” reply, he returned control to me, we finished the check ride and returned to Willie.

I landed, taxied to the chocks and shut down the engines. While I filled out the flight records, the check pilot crawled under the airplane. He said, “Stick your head under here when you finish,” which I did. There he pointed out a gash on the tip of the door that opens when the gear unfolds, and asked if I knew how that happened. Suddenly it dawned on me why he had so abruptly taken control and done a check of the belly. I had raised the gear handle before the plane had sufficient altitude, and the closing left gear door had just caught the runway as it folded shut. That was an automatic bust for safety. I was devastated. I had received a pink slip, that is, a failed check ride, so-named because the block containing the final grade was colored in with a red marker.

I sat outside the flight commander’s office while he was briefed on the circumstances. When I was called in and given my grade sheet, I was astounded to see the numerical score was still 95%! I had received a perfect score in every other category, totaling ninety-five points out of a hundred. The failed criterion of “flight safety” turned out to be only a five-point deduction; it was also an automatic bust requiring a recheck. Kaneski didn’t know whether to
laugh or cry. He was clearly proud of my score, but gave me holy hell for the
gear door stunt. I smiled through my tears, more than a little embarrassed, but
happy to have the grade and to have lived through a bonehead mistake.

The year was speeding by, and as December arrived, I packed my bags for
another Rhodes competition trip to Jackson, Mississippi, where this time I did
not even get past first base. I was neither surprised nor disappointed. John
Sullivan was successful on his second try, and watching him prepare for his
sojourn at Oxford, which had been put off until after pilot training, I began to
realize it was not my cup of academic tea. Rhodes Scholars were required to
be bachelors, and that ran head-on into a realization that had finally made its
way from my heart to my brain: I wanted to get married.

I flew back to Willie, checked my savings account and went straight to
Chandler Jewelers. After finding just the right ring, I wrote my first four-figure
check. I called Dorene to tell her Oxford was not in the cards and to ask if I
could join her for Christmas. “And, oh by the way, I’m catching a flight in two
hours, can you meet me at the airport?” My manners were still in the tank. She
had to cashier her holiday social schedule, overflowing with other suitors, at
least one of whom I believe had serious matrimonial intentions. Through dint
of great effort, and no small inconvenience, she met my flight. And so it came
to pass, sitting in her little car in the LAX parking lot, awash in the noise of a
busy terminal, I pulled an engagement ring from my pocket and asked for her
hand in marriage. Romance was clearly not my longest suit.

I really had no right to expect she would accept. We had known each other
less than a year, had not really spent much time in each other’s company, had
not that much in common, and I wasn’t all that sure her parents would ap-
prove. But, accept she did, and approve they did. We both knew we were right
for each other and that this marriage would be forever. We were becoming
close friends as well, who talked easily about life, hopes and aspirations – al-
though I was still light years from sharing Dorene’s free, open and giving spirit.
We had made a momentous decision whose consequences we could not pos-
sibly see or even imagine. It was the best decision I ever made.

The remainder of the Primary phase of training proceeded apace. As we
made the transition to Basic and the T-33, I was first in the class and remained
in that position through graduation. Rather than being assigned a full-time in-
structor, I was shuttled through several IPs, which I rather enjoyed. They were
all good teachers, and I learned a variety of techniques beyond the standard
training manual. Dorene was planning the wedding, catching me up on the
details by phone and during my covert weekend trips. Life was good. Too good
to last.
The first blow fell very unexpectedly. An inspection team was due to arrive in mid-May, setting our seniors all aflutter. Every record was combed for errors, checklists were reviewed and we students were told to keep our eyes open and our mouths shut. One worrisome detail concerned a measure of flight training progress called the “time line,” which tracked how closely the total number of hours flown by a class matched the prescribed rate. Lagging too far behind jeopardized a class graduating on time. Getting too far ahead could mean an awkward period of down time and lost proficiency. Because of Willie’s fair weather, the program was always on the cusp of being unacceptably ahead of schedule. The night before the inspectors were due, I was up for the last flight of the day, and had been told exactly how long to fly so as not to put the unit over the limit.

I planned my flight perfectly, and was on final approach with just enough time to land, taxi to the chocks and shut down the engine. Then came the call from the control tower to go around due to debris on the runway. By the time it was cleared for landing I had been aloft an extra six minutes or one-tenth of an hour, which I dutifully logged in the aircraft records. In spite of my explicit instructions, it never occurred to me to shave off the unanticipated additional time. I had to sign my name to the record as being complete and accurate, and I wasn’t about to burden myself again with a stricken conscience about false reporting. Accurate flight logs were a key to timely aircraft inspection, and while it could be argued that six unlogged minutes was not a big deal, it was to me. It also turned out to be a very big deal to my flight commander. When he reviewed the log the following morning and saw the unwanted tenth of an hour, he went ballistic, called me on the carpet, accused me of failing to obey a direct order and demanded an explanation.

I absorbed the dressing down, confident that once he heard what had transpired the whole thing would blow over. No way. He accused me of being a disloyal nitpicker and demanded I change the form immediately, which I declined to do. At that point he put me on confinement and told me I was not to leave my room except for meals until further notice. The longer I sat around the madder I got. My first assessment was that, however mad my flight commander might be, his hands were tied. Sooner or later, he would have to relent and put me back in the air or face having to explain why I was so far behind, tantamount in my estimation to acknowledging that he had given an illegal order.

John became the emissary between the warring parties, asking nightly if I was ready to relent and apologize, and reporting my emphatic NO the following morning. After three increasingly tense days of this nonsense, John arrived
at the room one night, but not with the usual question. He first opened a handy bottle of Jack Daniel’s whisky, and then said, “Lee, it is time to talk of many things, of silver bells and cockleshells and your Air Force career.” Reaching into the Bobbie Grace bag of tricks, he plied me with liquor and a strong dose of reality. “You, my friend,” he reasoned, “are about to win a battle and lose a war. Whatever moral comfort you might gain from holding your ground will have to be weighed against the cost of the damaging fitness report you will find in your records come graduation. Being first in the class, you clearly have them over a barrel, I can see it in their eyes. They desperately need you to step up and bail them out. You have a long and prospectively wonderful Air Force career in the offing, the stage set perfectly by your Academy record and your class standing here. There will be many battles far more meaningful than this one for you to fight. This is not the time to throw all of that away.”

He was right, of course. I had made no effort to see matters through the eyes of my commander, nor temper my personal code of right and wrong with respect to an issue that posed little threat to my integrity. Come the dawn, I swallowed hard, drove to the flight line, walked into the commander’s office and apologized for making his life difficult. Relief flooded his face. He invited me to sit down and chat and we talked for some time about family and life in general. He proved to be a very pleasant man and I left feeling good about what I had done despite the splitting headache of a familiar hangover.

That was but the first of two self-inflicted wounds that put my career in the balance. The second was not a complete surprise because I had taken the risk so consciously, but the bizarre turn of events that unveiled my covert trips to L.A. came completely out of left field. In mid-August, two weeks before our wedding, Dick Knoblock’s betrothed informed the L.A. Times Society section editor of her impending nuptials. The marriage of a former Rose Bowl Queen commanded sufficient notice to merit a large spread on the first page of the section, which was read cover-to-cover every week by the wife of my squadron commander. “Look Dear,” she said to her spouse over morning coffee, “that nice Lieutenant Knoblock is getting married, and to a Rose Bowl Queen. It says here he and a friend have been driving out to California twice a month for a year to court their sweethearts.” Red alert. By chance, Dick and I were present for duty that weekend. The security police found us in our rooms and escorted us forthwith to the commander’s office where we were read the riot act, put on confinement and told to await word about our fate.

This time career termination seemed like a very real possibility. I was a scofflaw pure and simple. What saved us must have been our superlative performance in the program, because the punishment was limited to confinement
through the end of the program, which had five weeks to run. Not wanting to appear ungrateful, I screwed up my nerve and asked if I could have three days leave two weeks hence in order to get married. Thanks to the intercession of my commander’s wife, who liked Dick and me, he relented.

My entire family was signed on for the August 25th event, to be held at St. John of God’s Church in Norwalk, with a reception to follow at the close by Tahitian Village Hotel. Getting them there was problematic. My mother was taken aback by the prospect of my marrying a Catholic, and she wondered if I really knew what I was getting into. My father didn’t much care. Bill’s presence was made possible by having set the date so as not to conflict with his school year. Anne and her Navy husband, Tom, whose storybook military wedding I had attended in Arlington two summers before, would fly in from Pearl Harbor, home port to his destroyer. After finally grasping that this was not a negotiable issue, the Virginia Butlers set off by car – my father had a phobia for airplanes – for the trek to Phoenix to fetch me en route to Norwalk.

The requisite rehearsal and dinner were surprisingly smooth considering the large wedding party, and the fact that we had required a dozen dispensations from the Catholic hierarchy, beginning with me, a non-Catholic, and ending with approval for a Jewish Maid of Honor. When the presiding priest, Father Don Kribs, made the latter request, an exasperated bishop plaintively asked, “Is the boy a good risk?”

Saturday dawned clear and hot. By the wedding hour, the temperature had climbed above one hundred degrees. The ceremony was lengthy but went off perfectly. Dorene was stunningly beautiful in her gown; I couldn’t take my eyes off her from the moment she appeared at the rear of the church. We said our vows with quiet conviction, feeling secure in our love and knowing we were perfectly suited to one another. If ever a marriage were made in Heaven, then surely it was ours. The timing of that back somersault just as Dorene walked through that particular door had to be exquisite; a split-second difference in my rotation or her stride would have taken our lives in very different directions. I cannot imagine any other path that would have brought me the boundless love, joy and contentment that have attended our union.

The reception was joyous, overflowing with good feelings all around. Only years later did I learn that when the happy throng maxed out our refreshment budget, John stepped up and paid the additional tab. He also gave us a beautiful radio, with detachable speakers, an expensive and highly useful gift that we treasured. Here was a true friend, one with whom we would cross paths many times, not always under happy circumstances.

Around 6:00 p.m., we changed and packed our things into my parent’s car,
a Buick convertible, which they insisted we take for the drive back to Phoenix; it was an attractive, sporty car so we were happy to oblige. With no honey-moon on the horizon, and a wedding night reservation at the humble Ramada Inn in beautiful downtown Blythe, California, a spiffy automobile was a wel-come touch, especially with a long, hot drive ahead.

I was released from confinement upon return to Willie. However, further retribution was exacted in the form of withholding the awards that are nor-mally bestowed on the top graduate. I was just happy to avoid a court martial. Besides, I had just been given something far more meaningful. When I left Primary for Basic, Jim Kaneski decided to give me some additional incentive to maintain my first place standing in the class. He said that if I finished at the top he would give me his most prized possession – an 8 x 10 photo of him buzzing the air base in Okinawa at shoe top level above the runway. The day I pinned on my wings he stepped out of the audience, saluted and handed me the pic-ture. We both had tears in our eyes. I had grown very fond of Jim. He not only taught me the basics of flight, but also what it meant to love flying, although I would never acquire his visceral attachment to airplanes. And he introduced me to the fighter pilot mentality, the unique mindset that empowers the most successful combat aviators. Extremely competitive, bulldog determination to be the best, a childlike awe of being aloft – it was a mental state I aspired to but would never quite achieve. Years later, at the 44th reunion of my class, I returned the photo to Kaneski in the presence of my peers and several of his. “Jim,” I said, “this picture belongs on the wall of a true fighter pilot, and be-tween the two of us, that would be you.”

Rather than trophies, what really mattered at this juncture were assign-ments. We had been tensely awaiting the list of operational units earmarked for our class. Rumors and phony lists abounded. One week before graduation, the official list was finally posted. It was worse than anyone had predicted. There were only six assignments to jet aircraft, the most desirable and promis-ing from a career perspective. Of those, three were to F-102 squadrons and three were to T-33 duty as instructor pilots. Recalling my dislike of the F-102 alert routine that I had observed during my cadet field trip, I mulled over the T-33 choices. Two were to training bases in Texas and one to Craig in Selma, Alabama. By this point, I had had my fill of hot, dry desert flying, and so, de-spite my antipathy for the Deep South, chose Selma. Dorene, a Texan by birth, was not thrilled but bought my reasoning that I needed a more challenging flight environment to build my pilot skills. I had no idea just how challenging it would prove.

Notwithstanding its moments of drama, pilot training was a mostly happy
time for me. I was proud of having mastered the entry-level aviation skills and having successfully competed with a very talented group of contemporaries. The trips to L.A. built strong bonds with Dick and Jerry and matured my relationship with Dorene into a lifelong commitment. The fifty-five weeks had its share of crises, but I was comfortable in my role as student pilot. Now I was about to leave that comfort zone and step into the real Air Force, join an operational unit with a specific mission, and serve a commander who would render a fitness report rather than a training evaluation. Moreover, I was now a married man with new and unfamiliar responsibilities to merge with my powerful drive to advance in my profession, a drive that apparently did not go unnoticed among my peers. As I reflect on this inaugural tour in the real Air Force, an incident comes to mind that served as a rather abrupt reminder that I might not have been perceived as the most congenial new 2\textsuperscript{nd} lieutenant to enter the active ranks.

One afternoon, I received a phone call from one of my fellow students, Roger Stringer, who was also a ‘61’er from the Academy. He asked if I could stop by his room for a minute. I couldn’t imagine what that might be about and was rather uneasy in responding. While I had held Roger in high regard as a cadet, his behavior in pilot training had become decidedly peculiar. His appearance and military deportment both declined markedly, and he became the class clown, occasionally to the point of disruption. Nonetheless, I walked over to his room, and found him in bed, with the curtains pulled, and looking like he was recovering from a binge. “Have a seat,” he said, waving at a chair nearby, “I just want to give you some friendly advice, one classmate to another.” I stiffened but decided to hear him out. “Lee, I’ve been watching you now for some time, and while you’ve obviously got a lot of potential, you really need to lighten up. Life is too short to take it as seriously as you do, and to be frank, it makes your colleagues uncomfortable.” I really didn’t know what to make of that bit of unsolicited psychology, other than finding it pretty damn presumptuous. Nonetheless, I bit my tongue, thanked Roger for his interest and concern, and took my leave.

What I finally concluded is that Roger meant well, and I considered it something of a compliment that he felt comfortable enough in our relationship to be so candid. He was telling me that I could usefully spend some time thinking about how others regarded my values and ambition, and maybe even be a little more hospitable in the process. Much later in life, I realized what he was really getting at was balance, carving out time and attention for the people around me, whether friends or family, no matter the demands of my aspirations and duties. In retrospect, it was very cogent advice, but, in truth,
for the next thirty years I would never succeed in finding that balance. The opportunity costs in terms of my wife and children would be severe, but even more so for me. I never mastered the skill of being fully in the moment outside of work, drawing joy and satisfaction from focused engagement with loved ones, friends and colleagues. Those rewards can never be recouped, their loss only regretted. Roger would have been disappointed that I failed his expectations, but as it turned out, he was dealing with a bigger problem. Two years after graduating from pilot training, he was dead from cancer.
The first stop after pilot training was Survival School at Stead AFB, just outside Reno, Nevada. Stead hosted one of several programs designed to teach crew members how to cope with extreme conditions in the event they had to abandon their aircraft. I was attending a three-week course on the basics of escape and evasion, living off the land, hand-to-hand combat, and every soldier’s nightmare, coping with imprisonment. Since the program was only three weeks long, we decided it was best for Dorene to stay in Norwalk with her folks and I would live in a base dormitory for the duration. We packed our few possessions into the Rambler station wagon I bought in a fit of practicality just before graduation. I had sold the MG to the son of the Williams wing commander, and purchased a butt-ugly little green box from a dealer in Chandler. It had no redeeming features, other than enough room to accommodate everything we owned. Dorene was not happy when she saw it, and I can’t say that I blamed her. However, it proved its worth several times over in the course of the next three years.

At the end of the third week, after a two-day hike through cold and snow in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, we were hauled back to the base where, starving, I headed straight for the officers’ club, not bothering to shave or shower. As I passed through the lobby on my way to the kitchen, the sound of a familiar voice stopped me in my tracks. I turned in its direction and there on the screen in a TV viewing room off to the left, was the somber face of President John F. Kennedy. His words, in mid-sentence, sent an even colder chill down my spine than the unseasonable snow: “...an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response.” All stop. What in the world had transpired while I was traipsing through the wilds of Nevada? I glanced at the calendar sitting on the table by the television set; it read October 22nd, 1962. The Cold War had suddenly gotten very hot – the Cuban Missile crisis threatened the world with a nuclear holocaust.

I went immediately to the phone and called Dorene, who had watched the
same broadcast. After catching up on the events of the last few days, I hung up and checked in with my supervisor, who told me to sit tight and wait for further word, which came the next day. All United States combat units were put on high alert; personnel in training status without combat skills were told to stay in place. With mankind on the brink of potential annihilation, I found myself assigned to the Testing, Measurement and Evaluation Branch of the Student Training Squadron at Stead, perhaps for the duration of my career which, along with my life, might prove to be very short. Were that to be the case, I wanted to live through whatever the coming days might hold together with my bride of less than two months.

Dorene and I agreed that she would come and join me in Reno, although she was, of course, reluctant to leave her parents. But, with her brothers close by, she knew they would have someone to lean on, so she fired up the Rambler and headed north, shepherded through the worst of it by a friendly 18-wheeler who saw the packed station wagon and figured she could use an escort. I had taken a room at the Blue Fox Motel, where we set up light housekeeping. Light, cheap housekeeping. Reno, a gambling mecca, was very pricey for my pay of $222.30 a month before taxes, supplemented by a $100 a month hazardous duty pay and modest housing allowance. The room accounted for most of that, leaving precious little for necessities like…food. I ate breakfast and lunch at the base mess hall, while Dorene became a scavenger, and a clever one at that. In those days, it was common practice for casinos to hand out Grub Stake packets, small cloth sacks of five or ten nickels intended to lure customers to the slot machines. By making the rounds of Reno twice a day, Dorene collected enough change to buy herself lunch and the two of us dinner. She became master of disguise, managing to avoid recognition as she drew on the local largesse. Better to feed us than the slots, we rationalized.

This hand-to-mouth existence lasted until early December, when the missile crisis was resolved and the Air Force returned to a more normal footing. We packed the little station wagon and began the long drive to Selma, not certain we had enough money to pay for both food and gas. That worry was deepened after a brush with the law that triggered a dimension of Dorene’s personality I had not witnessed: barely controlled fury. As we reached midmorning of a Sunday, our last day on the road, a bit behind schedule because we had mistakenly circled Shreveport in the wrong direction, we reached the city limits of Minden, Louisiana, a smidge of a town we would never have noticed had it not been for the flashing red lights that suddenly appeared in our rear view mirror. Dorene was driving and I was navigating; we were nonplussed by this abrupt intrusion, as we had been moving with the accompanying traffic. The arresting
officer approached, replete with wide-brim hat and sunglasses, and accused us of a speed the Rambler could not have reached had we driven it off a cliff. With our Arizona plates we had been snared in a classic southern highway patrol trap designed to extort out-of-state drivers.

Dorene was not happy and made that clear in no uncertain words. I stepped out of the car to check on some noise emanating from under the engine compartment. When I got back in, matters at the driver’s window were going from bad to worse, so I quietly suggested to Dorene that I take the wheel and follow the nice man to the courthouse as he was now demanding. Twenty minutes later, we were in front of the local magistrate who was truly judge, jury and hangman. After a perfunctory hearing, he slammed down his gavel, found Dorene guilty as charged, and pronounced her sentence: “twenty dollars or twenty days.”

Dorene reacted with supreme indignity, giving the courtroom considerable pause at the thought she might actually take the twenty days. Considering the state of our finances, that prospect was not wholly implausible. I checked my wallet, wherein resided three ten-dollar bills. I placed two of them on the judge’s bench, took Dorene by the arm and began a forced march toward the door. As we entered the hallway leading to the front steps, Dorene saw a water fountain, pulled up short and growled, “I want a drink of water, or does that cost money too?” The patrolmen standing by the fountain headed for the tall cotton and we headed for Alabama, me now knowing I was married to one hell of a woman.

We pulled into Craig late in the day and checked into the Visiting Officers Quarters, an unattractive, low-slung building with a screened porch. We were tired, cranky and out of sorts. Driving through Selma to get to the base was thoroughly depressing. This shabby little town is flanked on its east side by the Edmund G. Pettis Bridge, which two years thereafter entered the annals of infamy. There was precious little by way of off-duty diversion. At first glance, Craig was not much more appealing. Built in the forties, many of its buildings were “temporary” structures that had become all too permanent. It was home to a runway, with associated support facilities, a headquarters complex, the requisite commissary, base exchange (BX), officers’ club, theater and chapel, and two housing areas – one a cluster of converted one-story dormitories converted into triplexes, and the other a collection of newer brick homes.

The next morning, I went to the wing headquarters and signed in. As I expected, Craig housed two Pilot Training Squadrons, each with four “flights,” of which two were dedicated to Basic Training in the T-37 and two to Primary Training in the T-33. I was assigned to the 3615th PTS, and set off to meet my
commander, an uptight major who viewed the instructors and students in his employ as threats to his next promotion. I quickly got my fill of him when he decided that since I needed to become current in the T-33, i.e., newly proficient after the prolonged stay at Stead, before heading to instructor pilot school, we would go on a cross-country orientation flight to San Antonio where the training program was located. We took off early the next morning into a low overcast with me flying the airplane from the front seat. At two hundred feet we were enveloped in clouds, the first real weather I had experienced as a pilot. Not having flown in three months, and having only done instrument flying in a simulated environment, I was quickly disoriented and struggling to keep up with the pace of the instrument departure. This phase of flight demands precise execution of sequential climbs and turns; changing speeds, headings, and altitudes; and several radio calls. It would have been challenging even in visual conditions; with my rusty skills and lack of experience, a departure in the surreal conditions of honest-to-God weather was an extreme test. Hearing my overseer sucking hard on his oxygen didn’t help. It was a rocky start to the trip, but as it progressed my reflexes improved and I got us back to Craig in one piece.

During my impromptu trip, Dorene got her first taste of the Air Force sisterhood, that extraordinary band of spouses who draw strength and solace from shared devotion and sacrifice in service to their husbands’ careers, their children’s peripatetic life and the military community. Alone in a bleak facility, on an unfamiliar base in the heart of an alien culture, her spirits were at a low ebb. Into that emotional abyss stepped Dee Cairns, the wife of my classmate, Doug, one of several members of the class of 1961 assigned to Craig. She invited Dorene to spend the weekend with her and Patti, Doug’s sister and wife of classmate Jimmy Hourin. This was but the first of many liaisons to follow, with Jimmy Poole, Stu Boyd, John Payne, the Conleys, Mizes and others, many of whom became lifelong friends and with whom our paths would cross on many occasions, both happy and tragic.

Upon return from the flight to San Antonio, I immediately made the trip again, this time with Dorene in the faithful Rambler. On arrival, we were temporarily sheltered by two of Dorene’s maiden aunts and their brother who had lived together in their pleasant white wood home. That arrangement lasted until we found the Hawaiian Village Apartments, on the outskirts of town and not far from Randolph AFB, home to Basic Instructor School where I would spend the next three months. I carpooled with fellow Craigite Ted Mize, a quiet, unassuming Southerner. He and his blonde wisp of a wife, Kathy, were one of our favorite couples, sweet people who were madly in love and did not deserve the cruel fate that his flying career held in store.
Instructor pilot school was intended to teach rated pilots, new and experienced alike, techniques for imparting flying skills to students. Ironically, my instructor, whose name I have repressed, either had not himself learned the art of imparting these techniques or simply didn’t care to. Whatever the case, he made my experience useless and frustrating. We had terrible chemistry to boot, so all I got out of the twelve weeks was a lackluster training report and a few more hours of flying experience. On the home front, Dorene and I got our first taste of a more structured married life and its flavor was very appealing. She finally got to do some cooking, a talent she had acquired from her mother Veda and one I quickly came to relish. Imagine then my surprise the night I raised the first bite of a new concoction she had prepared, only to have the fork snatched away from my mouth with the admonition, “Don’t eat that!” Having just tried the cabbage balls herself, she made a command decision about the recipe and spared me whatever had gone wrong with it.

We returned to Craig in late March of 1963, bolstered by news that sent our spirits soaring: Dorene was pregnant. We had made our first miracle, one that has brought boundless joy to our lives from the moment the conception of our son was affirmed. We arrived to a warm welcome from our unit sponsors, Captain William J. Frazier – known as B.J. – and his wife Robbie. B.J., a courtly, modestly rotund southern gentleman, and Robbie, a classic belle, were lovely, caring people who greatly facilitated our transition into life at the base. The first order of business was finding a temporary place to live, as quarters were not immediately available. We put our names on the list for the triplexes because, being modified barracks, they were considered substandard and so the government charged the occupants only 75% of the monthly housing allowance. That would mean an extra twenty-five dollars a month, a huge amount of money in our eyes. B.J. then escorted us to Jones Trailer Park, which he assured us was far preferable to anything else for rent in Selma. If that were true, I’m glad we didn’t see for ourselves, because the trailer park was certainly no prize. Our little gem was in wretched condition, with filthy curtains and frayed wiring that caused the ceiling fixture to flicker on and off. Mr. Jones, the owner and manager, was a slum landlord and a first-class jerk who threatened us with legal action when we informed him that the curtains had dissolved in the wash.

Fortunately, we were in this aluminum purgatory for only a month before being notified that our now very highly desired Married Officers Quarters, or MOQ, had become available. We moved into an end unit and, having lived in two apartments, two motels, a VOQ, a trailer and with relatives during the first six months of marriage, we were in our first home. For a whole year and a half.

Meanwhile, I was going through my local area checkout with the Craig
Instructor Pilot (1962 – 1964)

Standardization-Evaluation Section, a collection of elite pilots whose task was to acquaint new instructors with the unit’s rules and regulations and the flight training area. They also periodically conducted ground and in-flight evaluations to ensure instructors were competent and abreast of their professional knowledge. I learned more from this one-week program than I had in three months at Randolph. My spirits were much improved when I reported to ‘C’ Flight, one of four such units in my squadron. The commander was a highly nervous captain, who was seconded by an able assistant of the same rank, Ray Wellington. My element leader was none other than B.J. Frasier, who supervised me and four other instructors. The flight commander was a reject from Strategic Air Command, where he had been thoroughly traumatized by the rigid, stressful, unforgiving environment created over eight years by General Curtis LeMay. He was terrified of the squadron commander, hated making decisions, stayed hidden in his office and let Ray, who was universally respected, handle most of the flight’s business. To a man, his instructors disliked their ostensible leader, led by B.J., who detested him.

This was all lost on me at first. I had my hands full with the five students I inherited when I took the place of a departing IP. Four of them were terrific young pilots who were easy to teach; the fifth was entirely different. He was high-strung, a condition that intensified the closer we got to an airplane. He could fly well enough, but was uncommonly nervous in the air. Aviation clearly held no joy for this poor soul, but he was mine to teach. Not for long.

The morning of May 9th got off to a bad start. Dorene was now three months pregnant and our nights were often fitful. I had overslept, dressed in a rush, skipped breakfast and hurried to the flight line, where I had an 8:00 a.m. takeoff scheduled with my reluctant student, who would be making his first simulated instrument departure. We discussed the mission at the table, grabbed our helmets and parachutes, and rode the shuttle to the airplane, arriving right on time. We would be first off the ground in a long line of departures, so promptness was essential. We started up, taxied to the runway threshold and at 8:00 a.m. sharp, the familiar drawl of B.J. Frasier, who had the duty in the mobile control unit located adjacent to the runway, cleared us for takeoff.

I was in the front seat and the student was in the rear, his cockpit screened on the inside to simulate weather flying by a canvas hood that pulled forward from behind his seat. The syllabus required that the entire mission, from brake release to landing, be flown with the student under the hood. This made the takeoff roll very sporty as he struggled to keep the nose on the center line of the runway using only his directional indicator for reference. I stayed on the controls with him until we got airborne and then kept my hands an inch or two
away from the stick and throttle as we gained altitude. At one hundred feet, he raised the gear. At three hundred feet he reached for the flap handle, but instead of raising the flaps, he got flustered and lowered them from their 30% takeoff position to full down. The airplane ballooned upward several hundred feet, airspeed dropping. I took control of the plane and, as I raised the flaps to correct my student’s error...the engine ground to a complete halt.

We had instantaneously gone from full power to zero RPM, a reality immediately apparent from the neck-snapping deceleration and the fact that my head was thrown forward into the instrument panel where the lifeless tachometer stared me in the face. Not a good situation. We were well below the recommended minimum ejection altitude of two thousand feet and whatever airspeed we had achieved began rapidly to bleed off. I nursed the plane up a few more hundred feet and started a right-hand turn away from the runway, now about a half mile behind us. We had taken off almost directly into the rising sun and the horizon was partially obscured by an early morning haze. I initiated the emergency engine restart procedure and continued the turn through 270 degrees. While waiting for an indication of engine response, I punched the mike button and advised Mobile Control of my situation. B.J.’s calm voice came back immediately, asking me my intentions. I replied that I was now in a position to make a 90-degree left turn for an attempt at a downwind landing. B.J. managed to stop the next airplane in line from taking the runway and told me I was clear to land. At this juncture, my student’s panic-struck voice came over the intercom, “Sir, the smoke is so bad back here I can’t breathe.” New problem. The engine was on fire, sending smoke into the rear cockpit.

I advised mobile control of the smoke, which he confirmed, followed by the entirely reasonable suggestion, “Why don’t ch’all bail out?” I said, “Roger that,” turned the aircraft another ninety degrees in the direction of the original takeoff, and ordered my terrified student to bail out. “Sir, you mean eject?” he screamed. I repeated the order, this time laced with an obscenity. My sense of urgency was multiplied by the fact that in the T-33, my ejection seat was disabled until his seat had left the airplane. My life was literally in his hands and he was having a nervous breakdown. Whatever I said had the desired effect, because in a trice the canopy exploded away and he was gone. New problem. When the canopy departed, the powerful slipstream sucked every loose item from my cockpit, dirt, checklist, maps, whatever, obscuring my ability to ensure the aircraft was pointed in a safe direction. When my vision cleared, I was looking at the base housing area. No way. I yanked the nose thirty degrees right, let go the stick and ejected, with no idea of my altitude and nowhere near the prescribed body position to ensure safely clearing the cockpit, as the seat departed.
Instructor Pilot (1962 – 1964)

The wind snapped me backward and the automatic parachute deployment sequence began. Squibs fired to release the lap belt, and as I separated from the seat a lanyard attached at one end to the seat and at the other to my parachute ‘D’ handle pulled the latter free from its cradle, allowing the parachute’s protective bag to open and the canopy to flutter free. It filled with air and I felt the familiar opening shock. One swing later I hit Alabama like a sack of rocks. As I lay dazed under my collapsed canopy, a dimly familiar sound began to bleed into my helmet: the labored chugging of an ancient tractor, drawing closer by the second. “Well damn,” I thought, “I’ve survived the ejection only to get plowed under by some local farmer.” I sat up, found a rib seam of the canopy, followed it down to the hem, pulled my head free and turned toward the noise behind me. I was nose-to-nose with the angled front tires of a Farmall tractor stopped six feet away.

The engine stopped and down climbed an elderly black gentleman wearing overalls, muddy boots and a soft, wide-brimmed hat. He walked gingerly over to where I sat, took off his hat and began to slowly turn it, first one direction and then the other. Finally he spoke, asking in a kind voice, “Boss, did you hu’t yourself?” I thanked him for his concern and assured him I would be OK. He nodded gently, and then, leaning down closer to my face, and like B.J. a moment earlier, asked another entirely reasonable question. “Boss,” he inquired, “which way did yo’r machine go?” Realizing the import of his concern, I raised up on an elbow and surveyed the boundaries of the large corn field he was plowing. Off to the north, directly behind him and several hundred yards away, a plume of oily black smoke rose from the middle of a clump of pine trees. Pointing to it, I reckoned that was the last resting place of my machine, a plot of earth which my new friend blessedly confirmed was uninhabited.

I asked if he had seen any sign of my companion from the plane, and this time he pointed to the south where I saw the orange and white canopy of my student. It was surrounded by what looked to be a dozen children, who had poured out of the tin roofed shanty where my new Farmall buddy and his wife lived their sharecropper life. At that moment, the rescue helicopter arrived to pick up the student, take him to the base and return for me. I didn’t realize that I had hit my left knee cap on the windscreen railing during ejection until I walked to the chopper and my leg collapsed as I tried to climb aboard. At that point, it was onto a stretcher, which made my arrival back on the flight line more dramatic than necessary.

News of the crash spread like wildfire. In ‘C’ Flight, the commander’s reaction, voiced to Ray Wellington, was, “Oh, my God, Ray, do you think I’ll be
charged with supervisory error?” Ray made the obvious retort: “Don’t you want to know whether they are dead or alive?” In base housing, panic struck the wives whose husbands were scheduled to fly that morning. As if the towering column of smoke weren’t enough, a passing motorist who had seen the crash called the Selma radio station, which broadcast the news before contacting the base about survivors. Fortunately, Dorene was still asleep and was protected from rumors by Betty Reeves, our back-door neighbor. She and husband Andy, a major in the maintenance group, heard the radio report, and knowing I was in the first launch, agreed that Betty, who was about to leave home for an Officers Wives Club Coffee, would stay close by. She poked around in her garden, dressed to the nines, watching for signs of Dorene who shortly appeared in the kitchen. Betty then invented some pretext to drop in and chat until the squadron commander’s wife arrived to confirm it was me, now in the hospital not much the worse for wear. Dorene handled the news with great aplomb. It proved to be good practice.

An accident board convened and after a brief investigation determined that a main engine bearing had failed, throwing the compressor wheel off center. Its blades had then torn into the engine casing, igniting a fire that triggered my student’s smoke alarm. Mechanical failure, not pilot error. A week later, my knee mostly healed, I was cleared to fly.

The accident made me something of a celebrity. There was general agreement that I had handled an urgent situation calmly and correctly – at least after the fire and Captain Frasier’s advice got me off the less than brilliant idea of landing against traffic. None of my other students were affected, and my stock rose a point or two in their eyes. Not so with my mishap student. His incipient fear of flying was now Starkly manifest. Every unexpected sound or turbulent bump set him off. He was in mortal fear of going solo. After a couple of aborted rides, I went to Ray and told him I was in way over my head with this guy. Ray took him on personally for the remainder of the program and under pressure to keep the washout rate low, got him to graduation. Big mistake. He made the erroneous judgment that his safest route as a pilot lay in helicopters. He made it through training and ended up in Search and Rescue in Vietnam. I am told that while on a rescue mission, he froze at the controls, had to be removed from his seat, and the Air Force belatedly stripped him of his wings.

My other students fared much better, as did those in the class that followed. I flew at every opportunity and soon became a skilled instructor. I also volunteered for the most onerous additional duty available, checking for and correcting grade book errors, the most common cause of failed unit inspections.
Morale in the unit shot up after B.J. Frasier initiated a coup that got the commander relieved of duty. He covertly convened a meeting of the ‘C’ Flight students and persuaded them to comment candidly on their End of Tour program evaluations. To a man they responded, and the sad excuse for a flight commander was gone within a week. Ray was moved up and brought a welcome change. After a year on the flight line, I was once again in a professional comfort zone, at home in the air and on the ground, now a respected officer and instructor. I was also a father.

Dorene’s pregnancy went splendidly. She was still water skiing on the little lake in the center of the base into her seventh month, to the horror of the wing commander’s wife, Ginnie Ault, who had come to appreciate Dorene through her involvement in the Wives’ Club and other unit functions. That relationship, coupled with the visibility my bailout had engendered, brought us to the attention of not only Ginnie, but her husband, Colonel Dick Ault, as well, one of the finest senior couples we would meet over the next thirty years. They were role models and mentors who, I am sure, watched over us like guardian angels. Dorene’s engaging personality and human touch also earned the friendship of my squadron commander’s wife. My sense is that we were seen as a promising young Air Force couple, equally devoted to the health of the wing mission.

As with every first child, our Brett’s arrival triggered a dramatic change in our lives. On the evening of November 5th, he decided the time had come to leave his increasingly cramped temporary quarters and take up residence in his own room. Dorene got the message first, informed me, and we swung into action. Her bag had long since been packed in anticipation of this moment, so we were quickly off to the Selma Hospital, where Brett, after three and a half hours of indecision, gathered his courage and made his appearance. This was before the enlightened days of fathers attending delivery, so I was left to pace the waiting room. When word came, I dashed to the room, kissed Dorene and looked down at my son. There lay Mr. Magoo. Eyes squeezed shut, pinched face, wisp of hair, this was a child only a mother could love at first sight. I caught myself, oo’ed and ah’ed in feigned admiration, privately worried they had given us the wrong baby. Fortunately not. Brett soon proved to be a bundle of sheer joy, a contented, beautiful and affectionate boy-child who grew into the finest son a father could ever want.

Turns out, I had some learning to do in the fatherhood business. Lesson number one: never change a baby boy lying on his back in a dark room. How was I to know they didn’t come potty trained? Lesson number two: when bathing squiggly babies, keep them in direct visual contact at all times. I had just lifted Brett from the kitchen sink after a sponge bath and laid him on a
cloth I had spread on the adjacent counter, some three feet long. I had left the drying towel on the counter behind me, which proved just out of reach. I took my right hand off of his tummy for one second, turned and reached back for the towel. When I rotated back to the sink counter, Brett was gone. Disappeared into thin air without a sound. Panic-stricken, I looked toward the floor. No Brett. Then, a muffled cry caught my ear coming from the end of the counter where sat, just out of sight, a large white plastic trash can. Looking inside, I saw Brett’s bottom. He had managed to make a full turn to his left, plunge off the counter and into the remains of last night’s spaghetti dinner in the half-full receptacle. Thus it was that Brett received his first two baths from me at only a half-minute interval.

Just as life was getting back to something approaching normal, a new factor entered the equation. In early March of 1964, Ray Wellington took me aside and said, “You’ve been offered a chance to go to the academic squadron and be a classroom instructor.” Not knowing how to think about this unexpected turn of events, I asked Ray’s opinion. He urged me to go. As a young flight instructor, there was not much room for advancement on the flight line. I could broaden my horizons in the classroom and still serve as a substitute IP to keep building flying time.

I gave the matter careful thought. I had spent my entire young life working my way through new situations, getting to a comfort zone, and then being forced out of it. To this point, that cycle had been beyond my control. Now, I had to decide whether to trade the familiar IP environment for an academic classroom where I would be starting from the bottom. I concluded things had worked out well enough during my first twenty-four years, so there was no point in changing the pattern. I made a pact with myself. As long as I could make these recurring transitions successfully, I would never turn down an opportunity, no matter how daunting. That commitment charted the course for my entire Air Force career, although even “daunting” proved inadequate to describe the trials that lay ahead.

With that decision, Dorene, Brett and I headed back to Randolph, home to the Air Training Command Academic Instructor School. Here, over four weeks, I discovered my innate teaching ability. I relished the study of theories of learning, the preparation and the challenge of holding attention from the podium. For my final exam, teaching my fellow students for an hour on a topic of my choosing, I selected “How to Solve Simultaneous Quadratic Equations,” an idea that came to me while Dorene and I were visiting her Uncle Bobby, her father’s youngest brother, in nearby Denton, Texas. He was a math genius and imaginative teacher. I spotted one of his lesson plans lying on a desk, was intrigued and
asked him to explain it. His approach to the solution of a problem that drove me bonkers as a student was so compelling I decided on the spot to use it for my teaching final exam.

The presentation went down quite well, a satisfying end to a valuable course and a confidence-inspiring note on which to start my new duties. I enjoyed my stint as a classroom instructor immensely. I taught T-33 Flight Planning, the foundation of safe, successful flying. My student evaluations were gratifying, I loved what I was doing, I was still flying on the line, and life was good. By August I was in a new comfort zone. It was not to last. One sunny afternoon, sitting in my office writing a lesson plan, I got a phone call from the bowels of the Pentagon, to wit, the office of the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff (DCS) for Personnel, Special Assignments Branch. “Good afternoon and congratulations, Lieutenant Butler,” said a voice, “you have been selected as an Olmsted Scholar. Where would you like to study?” A faint light bulb clicked on in the back of my mind. At some point during June Week, just a few days before Academy graduation, I had been called to the office of Colonel Wesley Posvar, a brilliant officer who had been selected to head the Academy Political Science Department while a major and was soon vaulted two ranks to his present grade.

He built a powerhouse faculty and came to exercise wide influence in the Air Force. I had excelled in a number of Poly Sci elective courses, gaining Posvar’s attention and now his mentorship. He explained that Major General George Olmsted was a West Point graduate, Class of 1922, who left the Army early due to the untimely death of his brother, who had been the top graduate in his Annapolis class of the same year. He made a fortune in banking and at the end of World War II was asked to go to the Pacific to assist with the reconstruction effort. He observed that few of our combat leaders had the training to deal with the chaotic political, economic and diplomatic situation they confronted in the aftermath of victory on the battlefield. On his return to the United States – and even greater financial success – he and his wife established the George and Carol Olmsted Foundation and won agreement from the Department of Defense for a proposed Olmsted Scholar Program that would allow two junior officers a year from the Army, Navy and Air Force, and one from the Marine Corps, to receive a two-year sabbatical for study at a foreign university. Scholars would continue to receive full pay and allowances, as well as a stipend from the Olmsted Foundation to help defray the additional expenses of living abroad on the local economy.

Colonel Posvar was careful to explain that the concept, although similar to the Rhodes Scholar program, differed on four key points. First, candidates were limited to service academy graduates. Second, the sponsor preferred that they
be married rather than single. Third, study must be in a non-English speaking country, requiring that both scholar and spouse receive extensive language study prior to departure in one of the two Defense Language Institutes, or the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute in Rosslyn, Virginia, an Arlington suburb. Fourth, the candidates would not be screened for selection until they had completed three years of active duty. From the moment I left his office, I had never once thought about being an Olmsted Scholar. Now I was one.

My benefactor needed an immediate answer as to university preference in order to gauge appropriateness, sort out duplicate requests or work unusual circumstances, such as those I now put in his in-box. I explained that my only foreign language was Russian, and that I had scored well in speaking, reading and writing on the standardized tests administered at the Academy. If the University of Moscow was a possibility, I would be a willing student. The request was made of the Soviet government through its Washington ambassador. In classic Cold War chess playing, Moscow replied they would be happy to have Lieutenant Butler at their premier university – if the American government would accept one of their senior Army colonels into our prestigious National War College. That was a non-starter, and they knew it. Another way of saying “nyet” without saying no. When I was advised of the decision, another came with it. The board of the George Olmsted Foundation wanted at least one scholar, preferably two, at the prestigious Institut d’Études Politiques in Paris. In their wisdom, they had stipulated that I, along with Academy classmate John Kohout, would fill that bill. That left me with the small problem of learning graduate-level French in five months.

Since the Olmsted program would take me out of the usual career progression pattern, I was inserted early into Squadron Officer School at Maxwell AFB, located in Montgomery, Alabama, fifty miles down the road. The first of three professional schools that every officer aspires to attend over a career, SOS classes comprised several hundred students, a mix of first lieutenants and captains. My class would begin in one week and run through mid-December. I would remain assigned to Craig until completion, but was required to live at Maxwell in the school complex. Dorene could come visit on the weekends, or as often as motherhood permitted. I bade farewell to the academic squadron, received an “Outstanding” effectiveness report from Major Mangrum, and signed in to my new duty in Montgomery.

As I set out on what I knew would be an extremely demanding journey over the next three years, I made a vow to excel at every step along the way. The top five percent of graduates from SOS were designated as “Distinguished,” and I was determined to be in that group. My goal at language school would be to
gain a high degree of fluency in the short time allotted. I had no idea what the Institute of Political Studies held in store, but if it had an honor graduate, then by God, it would be me. Laudable objectives, to be sure. Looking back on what Paris held in store, God was obviously not amused by my presumptuousness.

Being so near to my family, yet so far in terms of the demanding SOS curriculum, was worse than being widely separated. After a month of sporadic visits, we decided it was time to close the Craig experience. Dorene arranged for and executed the move by herself, a drill she would repeat for the majority of twenty-seven more moves over the next three decades. Once our possessions were on the truck – minus all of her shoes, which the packers had overlooked – she and Brett flew home to California for the duration of the course, and I buried myself in my studies. We were grouped into sections of twenty students led by a senior staff captain chosen for his leadership skills. As opposed to my experience to date of being associated mostly with fellow pilots, my section included officers from a wide variety of Air Force specialties – logistics, maintenance, intelligence, security and more. They were all sharp, capable officers, and I had a great deal to learn from them.

The program consisted of lectures, classroom instruction, field exercises and athletics. We were also required to write a lengthy essay on a professional subject of our choosing and to make periodic presentations in class. This was right down my alley, and I excelled in every phase. The weeks went by quickly and, as the end approached, I had an off-putting experience that reinforced my penchant for swimming against bureaucratic tides, such as malicious hazing of first-year military academy cadets. I had written my essay on the Management Control System, or, MCS, a Strategic Air Command measuring stick for evaluating unit performance that had been later adopted by Air Training Command. It covered virtually every aspect of unit life, even including such ancillary measures as the upkeep of lawns in the housing area, and proper parking at base facilities. Units performing similar missions were put in competition and awards were handed out at high-profile ceremonies.

At Craig, the implementation of the MCS took a pernicious toll on operational life. The student training squadrons became corrosively competitive as the penalties for “losing” became more severe. Careers were at stake, driven by number-crunching that took little note of the relative importance of infractions or margins of winning and losing. I despised the system; the increasingly stressful daily tally of numbers played into my decision to depart the flight line for classroom teaching. My professional blood boiling, I wrote and turned in a scathing indictment of the MCS, deciding to let the chips fall where they may. The upshot was that it was received with honors, but not returned and I had
to affirm in writing that I would destroy any copies. I exacted some measure of retribution by making the MCS the topic of my finals speech to the section. My section mates chose it as the best presentation, giving me the opportunity to compete school-wide for outstanding speaker. I gave a fiery oration, which the audience seemed to appreciate, but I nonetheless finished second to a chaplain, a gifted speaker who strung together a series of jokes that left us all in stitches. I was happy to achieve runner-up status, especially in light of the fact that I had made the cut as a “Distinguished Graduate,” my goal at the outset. Now, it was on to challenge number two, language school, which would prove far more difficult, given my lack of any prior study of the French language.

I didn’t fully appreciate at the time that accepting the Olmsted scholarship was a hugely consequential decision. It interrupted a process known in the personnel arena as establishing “command identity,” that is, becoming firmly grounded in the mission of one of the several large “major air commands,” or MAJCOMs, that collectively make up the United States Air Force. These mammoth organizations preferred to grow and advance their members over many years to ensure that lore was preserved and only those steeped in the command mission rose to executive positions. For pilots, that process typically entailed spending at least the first ten years of a career learning and contributing to a specific operational specialty such as bombers, fighters, airlift or training. By leaving Air Training Command for a three-year hiatus from the Air Force, I ran the risk of falling behind my contemporaries and becoming a man without a MAJCOM, no daddy organization to claim me and fight for me. I was now at the mercy of the system, faceless assignment bureaucrats in the Pentagon who did not know me and would be stuck with the prospect of trying to shove a young captain with limited flying experience down the throat of some major air command that had no prior stake in my training or future.

Ignorance was bliss, however, and even if someone had spelled all of that out for me it wouldn’t have mattered. The opportunity for me and my family to live in a foreign country, learn the language and customs, and get an advanced degree to boot, was too appealing. Surely, some good would come of it, no matter the career risk. What I would soon discover was that the real career risk of accepting the Olmsted scholarship was not that it interrupted my flying. It was that the program of study at the Institut d’Études Politiques far exceeded both my academic background and the meager French language abilities I would acquire en route. It would be the most humbling experience of my military career.
I loaded the Rambler for the last time (we would buy a French car in Paris) and drove to my folks’ little house on North 9th Street in Arlington, Virginia, where we would camp out over Christmas until we could find a place to live for the duration of language school, a five-month program starting in mid-January. Dorene and Brett flew in from California, and we began to adjust once more to being rootless, not even a substandard MOQ to call home. My parents were gracious hosts and made us feel comfortable for the time it took to find the Hamlet East Apartments in nearby Alexandria, where we leased a second-floor walk-up. The apartment was comfortable and brought us the good fortune of next-door neighbors Tom and Glory Sullivan, who became lifelong friends. Tom was a big, bluff Irishman with degrees in three disciplines, including theology; Glory, a steady, no-nonsense wife, mother, and business partner with a cherubic face and an infectious laugh. We liked them immediately and have watched them prosper financially and spiritually for forty years.

The State Department’s Foreign Service Institute (FSI) sits on the Arlington, Virginia, bank of the Potomac, looking across the river into Georgetown. It became the center of my universe eight hours a day, followed by four hours a night of memorization. I tried to take some time off over the weekends, but it was difficult to keep my mind from dwelling on the enormity of the challenge I had undertaken. The FSI approach was brutally in-your-face: six people in a small room with a native speaker who would articulate a sentence that each student would attempt to reproduce to the teacher’s satisfaction. At the outset we had no idea what the words meant, as we were not given textbooks until the third week of the course. The entire focus was on pronunciation, getting each syllable exactly right or as close to right as our brains and mouths permitted. The rationale for what I initially thought a very odd regimen became clear after we looked at our text: the words we had been repeating bore no relation to how they were spelled out in the text. Because the French alphabet is so similar to English, the temptation is to pronounce French words phonically,
as if they were English, producing gibberish to a French ear. Learning to pronounce the words properly to begin with reduced the risk of phonic mayhem when speaking from a text.

Dorene attended half-day sessions, which required putting Brett in day care. Fortunately, the Army ran a facility at Arlington Hall Station, some ten minutes from our apartment that was perfect for our needs. Dorene picked him up at noon and then returned to FSI at four to fetch me. That was our existence for the next five months. I was powerfully motivated to get the most out of this grind. I needed a vocabulary of at least twenty thousand words to cope with graduate study, not to mention eight conjugations for every verb, many irregular; noun-adjective, verb-adverb, number-gender agreement; unique pronunciation markings; idiomatic expressions, unique cultural derivations, and, oh yes, making it all sound like French. To make matters more difficult, after the first month I was jumped ahead a class as punishment for progressing faster than my five classmates.

By graduation in late June, I was sufficiently proficient to receive a ‘4’ on the State Department proficiency test, indicating a sound grasp of French fundamentals. I was also the leading man in a play traditionally performed by the students just prior to graduating. That novel experience introduced me to acting, which, much to my surprise, I found to my liking. It was many years afterward that I understood that acting is fundamental to leadership, especially for miscast, rootless introverts who, given a choice, prefer to keep to themselves.

My parents drove us to McGuire AFB, New Jersey, on the 13th of July, where we were to board a chartered government flight to Paris. The departure, scheduled for seven in the evening, was delayed time and again. Brett, barely eight months old, behaved beautifully, drawing admiring attention from another family awaiting the flight. We struck up a conversation that later became a relationship in France. Chuck and Lorraine Walker were a most appealing couple, with three small children. We stayed in touch for many years, until tragedy tore their life apart. Their son Bruce, who later became an Air Force pilot, went missing in action in April of 1972 in South Vietnam, just below the DMZ, when he was shot down while piloting an OV-10 on an armed reconnaissance mission. After hearing a tape recording with his son’s voice as he tried to evade capture, his father could never accept that he might be dead and for twenty years made a relentless effort to determine his fate. In 1992, members of the Joint Task Force for Full Accounting of all Americans imprisoned or Missing In Action saw Bruce’s ID card in a military museum in Hanoi, but that was considered insufficient evidence to declare him dead. The North Vietnamese government later revealed his death, and his name is now
Olmsted Scholar (1964 – 1967)

inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in our nation’s capital. I tell this tragic story here because I would soon enough come to understand how quickly a combat environment can turn a routine mission into a matter of survival.

We finally got off sometime after midnight, which put us into Orly International Airport late in the afternoon on Bastille Day, France’s 4th of July. Our promised escort from the American Embassy failed to show, so we were plunged unaccompanied into full-blown culture shock – find our luggage, find a cab, find a hotel in a strange city filled with rude people who spoke a very different French than I had learned. Our driver dumped us in front of a tired hotel with the assurance a room would be available. There was, and easy to understand why: it was filthy and overrun with roaches. Exhausted and famished, we decided to give it one night. Leaving our bags unopened, we set out at about 6:00 p.m. to find the nearest restaurant, only to discover that the dinner hour in Paris begins around 8:00 p.m. We finally found a proprietor who took mercy on this pitiful American couple with babe-in-arms. After a mysterious meal – French menus were still beyond my ken – we returned to our hovel and tried without success to sleep. Dorene sat in a chair the entire night holding Brett, fearing an attack of killer roaches.

The following morning we moved to a somewhat better-appointed hotel a few blocks from Place de l’Étoile, home to the Arc de Triomphe. The next adventure was to find the dealer from whom we had purchased a Peugeot 404 station wagon through his U.S.-based representative, the Rambler serving as down payment. That transaction complete, we joined the Paris traffic in search of an American military-run establishment known as Rue Marbeuf, for its location on a small street of that name intersecting the Champs Elysée in the heart of the tourist district. It was a multi-story Yankee oasis, housing a post office, exchange, officers’ club, snack bar, and admin offices. The Club restaurant was a blessing; we ate nearly every evening meal there for the next two months, while searching for an affordable apartment. A combo that played during the supper hour had a drummer who took a liking to Brett and would let him sit on his lap while he played.

Total immersion in la vie française exposed daily the limits of my French. The rapid-fire speech, everyday way of talking, references to popular and historical people and events, and even the daily newspaper – all were nearly unfathomable. I knew I had to build proficiency fast, so I enrolled in the Alliance Française, a French Government-sponsored school that was the salvation of generations of students in similar straits. I went to class from nine to noon while Dorene was apartment hunting; then we did a handoff of Brett, and
she attended afternoon class, followed by dinner at Rue Marbeuf. We survived financially thanks to a $25-a-day temporary living allowance from the Air Force, in addition to my salary, benefits and scholarship stipend. The hotel was adequate, although we were puzzled by the constant opening and closing of shutters, accompanied by bed linens being tossed into the courtyard in the center of the building. It was not until I was propositioned one evening at the hotel steps that the secondary role of our establishment became clear. At that moment, Dorene showed up with Brett, who was quickly surrounded by a bevy of admiring ladies of the evening, their interest in me now moot.

On the first of September, l’Institut d’Études Politiques, known throughout the French-speaking world as “Sciences Po,” opened its doors in preparation for the fall semester. I had arrived well before the appointed hour, not knowing the enrollment drill and wanting to allow plenty of time. As that hour drew near, I was joined by an increasing throng who had no concept of queuing up. When the doors were flung open, a free-for-all ensued. I fought to stay near the front, where a line of stanchions forced the mob into some semblance of order. Finally arriving at a window, I gave my name and waited for some hint of recognition, believing as I naïvely did that the Olmsted Foundation had paved the way for my registration. Wrong. The school had never heard of me, could care less that I was an Olmsted Scholar, but was nonetheless sufficiently impressed with my credentials from the United States Air Force Academy to admit me as a student provided I could pass an examination to determine if my French met its standards. Sciences Po is one of the premier French graduate schools; entry is extremely competitive for native students, and especially so for those few slots reserved for foreigners, usually from former French colonies. I completed the mountain of paperwork, turned it in, and was told to come back the following day for the test of my French, which would require three hours. I felt the hairs go up on the back of my neck. I didn’t know enough French to fill that much time.

The examination was in three parts. The first, called a dictée (deec-tay), took place in a large, acoustically-challenged auditorium filled with hundreds of my fellow applicants. An aged professor materialized on stage and began reading in smothered tones passages from a book he had selected for the occasion: “Une grande ville est comme une flame qui devoure ses environs” (a great city is like a flame that devours its surroundings). I was clueless. Didn’t understand a single word. Thirty minutes later, I folded my paper and turned it in...completely blank.

The second task went somewhat better, translating a portion of the NATO Treaty from English to French, which lifted my sagging spirits somewhat. At
the third hour, I was ushered into a room where sat a stern-faced professor. He was at least intelligible and seemed moderately interested in me. We chatted amiably for a bit, and then I was dismissed, having performed adequately, I thought. I returned to the hotel and spent an anxious night before returning for the verdict the following day. The axe had fallen. Application rejected.

Red alert. Failure was not an option. No way was I about to tell the United States Air Force, much less the Olmsted Foundation, that after five months of language school and relocating to France, I couldn’t even get to the starting blocks of Sciences Po. I decided to take my case to the highest authority, he being the Directeur de l’Institut d’Études Politiques. In retrospect, this was pretty damn cheeky, but it was consistent with a trait in my character that grew out of delivering papers over country roads, playing football as an undersized halfback, raising a mean-spirited calf, hawking advertising space, gaining five pounds in five days, and climbing back on a trampoline. I simply refused to accept failure, digging deep to find the physical and emotional resources to overcome adversity, and sometimes finding an angel with a quart of chocolate milk. In this case the angel’s name was Monsieur Henri-Greard.

It was a minor miracle that the director even agreed to see me. It soon became apparent, however, why his curiosity had prevailed over his better judgment. I knocked on his door, and he bade me enter with a cordial, “Bon jour, Monsieur Butler, qu’est ce que je peu faire pour vous?” (what can I do for you?). I told him what he already knew, that I had done poorly on my entrance examination, at which point he held up my pathetic dictée and smiled, “You mean this?” I said “Oui,” realizing that if he knew that he also knew I had done reasonably well on the translation and the conversation portions. Then I said in French, “Monsieur Henri-Greard, if you are of a mind, I have a proposition. If you will permit me to begin this program despite my failed dictée, I will depart immediately the first time I fail an examination of any sort, written or oral.” He reflected on this for a moment and then said the magic words, “J’accept votre proposition, Monsieur Butler. Your predecessor in this program, Monsieur Tony Smith, finished first in his class. Therefore, I will trust the judgment of this General Olmsted regarding your potential.”

I had met Tony Smith in Washington during language school. He was very impressive, a West Pointer whose father had been a diplomat in France where Tony went to local schools, gaining native fluency in French language and culture. He had given me some idea of what to expect, and now he became my savior in absentia. The director picked up the phone and ordered that I be enrolled in the Class of 1967 as a full-fledged student.

Having escaped this crisis, we were fortunate to finally find an apartment
we could afford just as another problem reared its head. We had worn out our welcome at the hotel: the disposable diapers we had been heedlessly flushing down the toilet for eight weeks finally backed up the building’s ancient sewage system. Paying for the French version of Roto-Rooter did little to mollify the outraged proprietor, who sent us packing. Dorene had found a fifth-floor apartment in a six-story building in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb on the western approach to Paris, just inside the Left Bank of the Seine River, which cuts through the heart of the city. The building was owned by Monsieur Raymond Lotteau, who lived with his wife and son on the floor just below. It was barely affordable – $275 a month with a two-year lease – and a long subway ride from Sciences Po, but Trois, Rue du Chateau, just off Avenue du Chateau, became our home for the next twenty-two months. Our landlord soon had reason to wonder about his new tenants.

The apartment had a major drawback: no washer or dryer. However, it appeared that if we removed the bidet from the bathroom, the resulting space and its plumbing would accommodate a washing machine, with room left over for a dryer, which could be vented through a nearby window. When I proposed this plan to M. Lotteau, he seemed puzzled. “But, M. Butler, there is no other place in the apartment to install the bidet.” “True,” I replied, “I would like to put it down in the basement, where we have our storage unit.” Deeper, puzzled frown. “But, M. Butler, there is no place there either to install the bidet.” “True,” I replied, “but we just want to put it there for safe storage, not to use it.” Bewilderment. “But, M. Butler, then you will have no bidet!” “True,” I replied, “we will make do without it.” Horrified at the prospect, he nonetheless agreed, and rushed off to tell his wife about the savages living overhead.

Life now fell into a new pattern. I studied relentlessly. When not in class, or transiting to and from, I sat on the couch and read, dog-eared French-English dictionary at my side. Dorene shopped the local economy, made daily mail runs to Rue Marbeuf, and periodically journeyed to Camp des Loges for more serious purchases or to visit with friends she found through various base activities. My studies were interrupted only once a month, when I made a difficult drive to the nearest U.S. Air Force installation, Evreux-Fauville Air Base, two hours to the northwest, to log the eight hours a month of flying time required to maintain currency and qualify for flight pay. I left the apartment at four-thirty in the morning in order to arrive in time for a 7:30 a.m. launch in one of the base T-33s. I found a soul mate at the base who was also in the minimum fly-for-pay category. We would take off, climb to max altitude, fly a circuitous route until the minimum fuel level, land, refuel, grab a sandwich, and then do the same thing again. I sat in the rear seat and studied while he flew the aircraft. It was boring and exhausting, but it was efficient.
Sciences Po is an intermediate training ground for future high-level French government officials. Four majors were available, of which the most appropriate for a foreign student like me was International Relations. This particular discipline had a heavy dose of diplomatic history, with somewhat lesser emphasis on international economics, law, and geographic elements of national power. I had very little background in any of these subjects. To make matters worse, it was a three-year program. Since I was on a two-year scholarship, I was entered in the second year and was expected to make up the first-year material on my own. Instruction came in two forms: lectures and seminars. The former were poorly attended because the student union hired stenographers to take verbatim notes that were available for purchase, an option I fully exercised. Seminars, comprising twenty students and a professor, were prescribed in each of the four sub-disciplines. Each required a major paper during the semester, attendance was mandatory, and grades were given for level and quality of participation. One grade was given in lecture courses, based on an end-of-semester oral examination rendered by the professor. A large closed-stack library was available, manned by uniformed bureaucrats who zealously guarded their possessions. This was a serious school, ruled by its staff, with centuries-old rules and protocols. Seven hundred students were typically in the International Relations program; the attrition rate after three years was some ninety percent. In short, the academic equivalent of a death march.

The first seminar I attended was International Law, led by M. Chaumont, very serious-minded and highly respected in his field. He began by going around the table asking each of us our name, country of origin, and in how many languages we could conduct research. I was once more humbled as I heard the replies; no one named less than three languages, some as many as six. Last to answer, my meager “two” was greeted with a subtle arch of the eyebrow. Poor American, unsaid. Next, M. Chaumont informed us that our essay was to be written in ancient français, eight additional verb conjugations used in formal prose but rarely spoken, except, most notably, by President Charles de Gaulle. It was my misfortune not to know any of these verb forms. The learning curve began to look extremely steep, beginning with my first attempt to withdraw a book from the “closed-stack” library. To begin with, the thick glass partition shielding the stern-faced guardian of the stacks from his unwanted customers was intimidating, and the unique French version of our Dewey decimal system was even more daunting. Considerable effort, therefore, went into finding the coded book designation, filling out the withdrawal slip just so, and putting on a properly humble face while passing the request under the glass. Having successfully met that little challenge, or so I thought, I sat and waited.
nearly an hour before my name was called. I stepped to the window, where the uniformed attendant had just snagged the arriving book from the creaky conveyor belt that snaked down from the bowels of the library.

As he was about to bring the stamp down on my withdrawal slip, a look of disgust crept over his face. He put down the stamp, slammed shut the cover of the book, picked it up, and placed it back on the conveyor belt. Then he turned to me, pushed my slip back under the window, and imperiously intoned, “M. Butler, when you learn to make a seven properly, you may resubmit your request.” It seems I forgot to draw the small bar through the stem of the seven as is the custom in much of the world, an oversight that required another hour to complete a new slip, its humble resubmission, and patient waiting for the conveyor belt. I now understood why France was such a difficult ally – given the leverage, they would impose their will on every possible issue.

My first paper was due in my Diplomatic History seminar, six weeks into the semester. It was a thirty-page, handwritten nightmare. I agonized over every word, sentence, and paragraph, worried about the level of writing, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. I submitted it on a Monday and waited with stomach churning the entire week for the promised Friday return. I was first to arrive at the seminar room, where waited my paper, centered just-so on a table bearing my name plate. As was the custom, the grade was recorded in the upper-right-hand corner, which was then turned down for privacy. The grading system, born in antiquity, was based on a zero-to-twenty scoring range, with the mark rendered as a fraction, $x/20$, with $10/20$ the minimum passing.

I sat and contemplated my fate for several long minutes before mustering the courage to lift the folded corner of the cover page. My vow to M. Henri-Greard was ironclad: if the numerator of the covered fraction were nine or less, I would pick up the paper and walk out the door, my scholarship down the drain. The arrival of other students prompted me to get it done; no point in sitting through the session as a non-student. As I ever so slowly peeled back the fold, I turned lightheaded – my eye caught the graceful French rendering of the number one…followed by a zero. Ten over twenty. I was flooded with relief. I lived to fight another day.

Daily life for Dorene carried its own quotient of stress, beginning with the demolition derby played out daily on the streets of Paris. We were hit six times in less than two years, four times with Dorene at the wheel. The worst of her trials was being rear-ended by a typically impatient motorist who took no mind of the fact that she was trapped behind a stalled truck, unable to proceed through the intersection just ahead. The unapologetic driver then blared his horn, while
shouting unintelligible epithets from his window. When Dorene stepped out to defend her circumstances, albeit in broken French, he decided debate was useless and tried to depart the scene. Dorene ran and fetched the truck driver, who sized up the situation, stepped down from his cab, reached through the offending driver’s window, and began to throttle him. This prompted an immediate change in attitude and a meek recording of his name and phone number. After that, Dorene concluded she needed to learn only a few key phrases in French, an education that began when she came steaming into the apartment and demanded, “Just teach me how to say, ‘Go to Hell’.” I learned a lot of French settling accident claims and supplying my wife with snappy retorts.

By the grace of God, I stayed afloat the entire first semester, making Christmas even more special. I had survived my seminars and all of my oral examinations with straight 10/20s. I had just been promoted to captain and was meeting my flying requirements. On the home front, the Lotteau family was making friendly overtures. And we had found companions at Camp des Loges: Bob and Helen Meredith, who became surrogate grandparents; Bob and Colleen Merriman, who loved Brett and were our genial companions at the card table; and Bob and Ardis Dalrymple (he an Army colonel), who took us under their wing. The promotion to captain pumped up the budget enough so we could decorate the apartment and stock it with a few gifts. On Christmas morning, we eagerly awaited Brett’s reaction as he emerged sleepily from his room. After studying the scene for a moment, he inquired in his most serious two-year-old voice, “What is that stupid tree doing in our living room?”

The spring semester brought month after month of grinding through the program, early morning drives to fulfill flight minimums, and some diversion with friends, one of the more novel being a 1965 Air Force Academy graduate by the name of Fletcher “Flash” Wiley. My apologies, Flash, but I cannot resist relating the genesis of our friendship. Only the fifth African-American grad, he was a tall, strapping man who earned his nickname from his style of play on the football team. Dorene and I first encountered him while walking the sidewalk bordering the Champs Elysée. He hove into view wearing flip flops, cut-off jeans and an Academy sweatshirt; as we passed, on a hunch, I said, “Hello, lieutenant,” which stopped him cold as I was not in uniform nor did he expect to be recognized. My intuition was driven by an earlier, out-of-the-blue appointment with General William S. Stone, the Academy superintendent the year I graduated, now a four-star general assigned to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) located in Paris. He assigned me the task of tracking down and squaring away a Lieutenant Wiley, whose distinctly unmilitary dress and bearing while living on the local
economy as a Fulbright Scholar – the Academy’s first – had somehow come to the general’s attention. Turns out, among his myriad pursuits, Flash had gained notoriety singing on the Parisian nightclub circuit, while trying to fly very low under the local American military radar – just not quite low enough. I explained the facts of life as the real Air Force saw them, and then Dorene and I took him on as a project. No few heads turned on the days that Dorene and Flash, he carrying Brett who adored him, had lunch together at Rue Marbeuf. Flash subsequently left military service, became a very successful lawyer, businessman and public servant in Boston, and has subsequently served the Air Force as a dedicated proponent, to include a seat on the prestigious Academy Board of Visitors.

We also became close to John and Joan Kohout, my fellow scholar and his wife, and their daughter Jennifer, who was Brett’s age and fast friend. The Kohouts had taken an apartment on Île de la Cité, close by where Pont Neuf spans the Seine River in the center of Paris. We spent a joyous Christmas evening with them over fondue and a traditional Yule Log. I knew from talking with John that he was faring well in his studies, and by semester’s end, I was feeling more confident in my own academic abilities, even scoring an eleven on one of my exams. By early June, the beginning of the long summer break, I felt comfortable embarking on the extensive travel the Olmsted Foundation expected of its scholars as part of their broadening experience.

We began with a trip to Germany, where I also completed my annual flight physical, which revealed that my already deficient eyesight had significantly declined – to the point that the doctor finally asked, “You don’t fly anywhere around here, do you?” The long hours of study were exacting a price, and not only visually. My physical fitness was also eroding. In truth, I was just trying to survive. Dorene did most of the driving, while I studied and Brett entertained himself with his love for reading. We began with a swing through France to Geneva, where we stayed at a lovely hotel and dined the first evening at Le Bord du Lac, a magnificent restaurant on the shores of the city’s famous lake. From there we drove to Rimini, Italy, by way of Venice, and spent two days on the beach. My brother, Bill, joined us for this portion of the trip, and he stayed aboard as we journeyed to Pompeii, Pisa, and Rome, where the traffic made Paris seem tame. I was driving when we entered the city, with Dorene in the navigator role. Reading the map was challenging at best, not helped by my bleating, “Are you sure?” in response to every instruction. Finally, she had enough. “Stop the car,” she said. Thinking she might be sick, I complied immediately, still in the middle of the street. Pandemonium ensued. Dorene got out, came around to the driver’s side, and said, “Please move over.” Amid the
shouted curses and blaring horns, we traded seats and roles. Two blocks later, when I issued my first navigational directive, Dorene stopped the car, turned to me and said, “Are you sure…” It was not a question.

We toured Rome for two days, beginning with the home of global Catholic power, where Brett tested the forgiveness of the Almighty. As Dorene and I stood in awe at the majesty of the Sistine Chapel, the boy-child announced a pressing need to go number one. After some searching, I located a men’s room deep in the bowels of the Vatican, marched Brett over to a towering porcelain urinal, and leaned over his shoulder to unzip his pants. The bending motion caused my prescription sunglasses to fall from my head and shatter in the pissoir. As I looked down in disbelief, Brett summoned up the epithet he had heard me utter some months before in the basement of our apartment when a messy bag of garbage I was carrying had split open. As the ‘F’ word reverberated through this sacred sanctum, visions of the Inquisition began to dance in my head. This wasn’t the end of it. Brett was now on a roll. Back on the tour bus, half-filled with vacationing nuns, he gave an equally vivid and nearly accurate impression of his mother’s Parisian street mouth, when he shouted, “Tupid ass,” at a reckless cab driver.

After two more weeks of travel, we returned to Paris on the eve of our fourth wedding anniversary and decided to splurge with dinner at the celebrated Tour d’Argent, nestled next to Notre Dame. Big mistake. We uttered a mutual gasp when we opened the menu and saw the prices. I calculated that we could afford two entrees and nothing more, no salad, no soup, no sides, no wine, no dessert. The waiter took this as a personal affront, making the occasion even less palatable. Adding insult to injury, the wealthy clan sitting round a nearby table ordered up a bottle of wine that must have come from the cellar of the Sun King. It was wheeled in on its very own cart, escorted by an entourage that included the entire restaurant hierarchy, opened with a ceremony fit for a coronation, decanted, and tasted to ecstatic shouts of appreciation. I scanned the wine list to see what this little piece of vintner’s heaven went for. A year’s salary would just cover it.

By the start of my second academic year, I was feeling much more comfortable with the work. Papers were less onerous, and my class participation was much improved. Unfortunately, the political atmosphere had turned poisonous. De Gaulle, seeking to enhance France’s autonomy, i.e., to thumb his nose at the United States, took the astounding step of pulling his country out of the NATO military (versus political) alliance, requiring that SHAPE move from its home at Porte Dauphine to Brussels, Belgium, a disruptive, costly transfer, multiplied by the expense of closing all its major military installations in
France, including Camp des Loges. We were left with Rue Marbeuf, the local economy, and a citizenry with some serious attitude toward Americans.

That antipathy abounded in the classroom, where many of my professors were ardently pro-de Gaulle. I overstepped my bounds with my Diplomatic History seminar leader when he tried to rationalize France’s failure to confront Hitler’s expansionism early on by arguing that, in the interval between the Munich Accord and Germany’s invasion, the French army had doubled its inventory of tanks. To that, I offered the ungenerous observation that going from one tank to two apparently did little to stop the eventual Nazi onslaught. He was not amused. From that point, I became the class whipping boy, abuse that intensified with the growing U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

I initially tried to defend United States actions in Southeast Asia, but two or three pointed questions from my professor revealed the depth of my ignorance. So I turned to the subject with a vengeance, devoting long weekend hours first researching the disastrous French experience in Indochina; then, to trying to understand my own country’s rationale for heading down the same bloody path. The more I learned and reflected, the deeper grew my concern. Emotional appeals for “vigilant anti-communism” and the speculative “Domino Theory” sounded increasingly hollow as I developed a finer-grained appreciation of Vietnam’s long history of being invaded and occupied, Ho Chi Minh’s patriotism, and the patent corruption in the South. This began to look very much like the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

The most important change in our lives, however, came with the news that Dorene was pregnant, a blissful event that would forever enshrine Paris among our most treasured memories. Frenchmen, however, not so much. When I shared the news with our landlord, his reaction was muted. Recalling the king-size bed and displaced bidet, he replied, “But Monsieur Butler, what did you expect?”

Lisa was born at l’Hôpital Americaine on February 6th, 1967, following a difficult delivery. The umbilical cord had wrapped around her neck, but thanks to a skilled Army OB and Dorene’s fortitude, everything was normal when our blonde angel made her appearance. Never was there a sweeter baby girl. My heart leaped when I first saw her. It still does.

As the end of the school year approached, my next assignment weighed heavily on my mind. I had received a letter from Air Force personnel inquiring as to my desires. Recognizing the sender as one of my former Academy instructors, I handwrote a reply, explaining that I felt the need to get quickly back into the mainstream, which meant flying and a tour in Vietnam. That took Air Training Command out of the equation, so I asked for the moon and got it: an F-4, the Air
Force’s leading fighter. This was once again risky business. I had no background in Tactical Air Command, home to the fighter pilot community, and would be back at the bottom of whatever ladder was put in front of me. I volunteered for Vietnam from a sense of professional obligation, indeed, necessity. It was a war; I was an airman. My peers were being thrust in harm’s way, and I was honor-bound to join them, notwithstanding my growing ambivalence about the conflict.

That settled, I redoubled my preparation for the upcoming week of ultimate examinations, which included the usual oral evaluations in course work, written exams in each of the four sub-disciplines, and a thirty-minute discussion with a panel of three professors. The first ten minutes of that session would be devoted to an “exposé oral” (x-po-za o-rale), a precisely formatted dissertation on a subject which I would be given one hour ahead of time in order to gather my thoughts, while under a proctor’s watchful eye. No books, no notes, just me, my silent watcher, and the clock. The kicker was that, no matter my record to date or how well I might do on the other examinations, a failing grade in the exposé oral, including the twenty-minute question and answer period to follow, meant no diploma. It was all in, no mercy, no recourse, do or die.

The course orals went quite well, the written exams marginally so, but as I reported to my assigned room for the jury discussion at the appointed hour, I was filled with apprehension. The stakes were high for every student, but I did not have the option of retaking the third year, an alternative available to some students who failed the exposé oral but had otherwise done satisfactory work. The proctor sat at a table on which rested a large cardboard box with no top. Inside were numerous slips of paper, each folded in half. The proctor bade me approach the box, turn my back to it, reach behind me into its contents, and withdraw one slip, on which was written a nine-word subject that would determine my fate.

I walked to my desk, sat down, gathered myself, opened the paper, and read: “Le Japon du Pearl Harbor au Traité de Paix” (Japan from Pearl Harbor to the peace treaty). For an agonizing moment, my mind was completely blank. What in the world was this subject intended to elicit? I knew the date of the attack on Pearl Harbor, but I was racking my brain to recall when the peace treaty was signed. That was key, because it obviously book-ended the interval whose importance I had to tease out of everything I knew about Japan’s evolving relations with the United States over the specified era. After an hour, I had decided to build my exposé around the thesis that the war in the Pacific could have been avoided if leaders on both sides had spent more time listening to each other’s objectives and concerns, understanding what was tolerable and what was not, breaking down the cultural barriers that led to gross misassumptions and a
huge destructive conflict. The proof of the thesis, I would argue, lay in the remarkably close relations established in the wake of that conflict, ties that helped bring greater stability to the broader region following the armistice in Korea.

The exposé and discussion went well enough, as least in light of my still shallow grasp of diplomatic history – I was awarded a 14 out of 20, a 70% that I took to the bank. I don’t know whether the jury bought my thesis, but the point for them was my ability to form and adequately defend a plausible position. I left feeling confident, and more than ready to bring this march to an end.

Our departure from Rue de Chateau was marred by a painful incident when Dorene and I undertook the task of cleaning our apartment, a professional service being out of the financial question. A long and tiring job was made more difficult when Dorene ran a large splinter deep into her right index finger while scrubbing a baseboard. We removed the visible portion, unaware that a sizable tip remained deeply embedded. As our departure date moved closer, the finger got redder and tenderer by the day. Rather than risk missing our flight, she elected to gut it out, making for a very unpleasant trip across the Atlantic, finger in a cup of ice, with a three-year old, an infant and a very worried husband.

My parents greeted us upon arrival, and we moved back in with them for a short period before heading for California, to reunite with Dorene’s parents, and to sign in at my new post, George Air Force Base, just outside Apple Valley and only two hours north of Norwalk. By then, Dorene’s injured finger had gone from bad to worse, until the splinter finally worked its way to the opposite side of its entry and was removed. My decompression didn’t really start until I received the keenly anticipated letter from Sciences Po. It congratulated me on earning a diploma from l’Institut d’Études Politiques, one that was awarded à titre étranger, which I took to mean that my overall performance was not worthy of a native Frenchman, but was acceptable given that I labored under the burden of being a foreigner. Accompanying the letter was a list of those who had been awarded a diploma, either unencumbered or qualified. Of the seven hundred students in my major, seventy-four had graduated; I was number seventy-four.

That mattered little to me or to the Air Force. I was granted the equivalent of a master’s degree in my official records, which was crucial to future promotion. Ironically, the grade that cost me an unqualified diploma came in my final written examination in Diplomatic History. I remembered the topic vividly: American Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia. Despite two years of intense study, I had been as obtuse in my essay as I remained in my thinking about United States policy. Now I was about to discover from close range why it had been so difficult to come to grips with our war in Vietnam.
As I recorded in the close of Chapter 7, my first insight into the fighter pilot mentality came in flight training, where I had observed Jim Kaneski’s personality transformation when we were aloft engaging in mock aerial combat with one of his instructor soul mates. He became hyper-animated, guiding my control movements with an urgency and excitement in his voice that sharply contrasted with his flat, disinterested tone in the flight room. He told me about his painful initiation as a rookie fighter jock in Okinawa, where he spent the better part of a year learning the techniques and instincts needed to compete with his peers.

This hot-jock world was macho to the core. Winning was everything, not just in the air but in any contest, no matter how trivial or silly. Case in point, a Friday night beer-bust in the Williams dormitory area, where a mélange of students and IPs had gathered to unwind as we neared the end of flight training. As the level of consumption mounted, two instructors, both former fighter pilots, treated us to a surreal spectacle of mano-a-mano combat. They began trading blows to the tip of each other’s right index finger, first one contestant extending his hand, palm up, with his elbow tight against his side and forearm level, accepting the strike; and then exchanging roles with his assailant. This ritual continued well past the point where both men were bruised and then bloodied. It didn’t stop until they were physically restrained to prevent what could have become permanent damage. This kind of behavior is of course a way of life in some leagues, such as boxing, but I had not expected to see this sort of minor league mayhem in the ranks of my own profession. I grudgingly admired the physical courage but wondered at the need to demonstrate it in such a public, quasi-barbaric fashion. Who were these guys?

I moved a step closer to finding out when I passed through the gates of George AFB to begin a six-month check-out program in the F-4, a twin-engine, two-seat McDonnell Douglas aircraft that had become the backbone of Air Force and Navy fighter fleets in the ‘60s. The Air Force chose to man the rear
seat with a copilot, while the Navy went with a radar intercept officer (RIO), a non-pilot aircrew specialist. I was to fly the ‘D’ model, with its advanced target tracking and engagement systems, which greatly improved its air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons delivery. Most of my classmates were neophytes like me, but a few were former fighter pilots getting back into the business in a new aircraft.

Dorene and I moved into one of the many single-story cinderblock duplexes available on the base and immediately fell in love with our neighbors, Carter and Jo Whatley. He was quiet and unfailingly pleasant, she more outgoing, freckle-faced and cute as a bug. Brett attended on-base preschool activities. Our social life was active and enjoyable. We drove often to Norwalk in our newly acquired, gently used, 1965 Mustang, for weekend visits. Lisa was in Heaven – she spent most of her time in Grandmother Veda’s arms.

The training program began with a month of classroom and simulator study. I got re-current in a local T-33, embarrassed to find how rusty my flying skills had become during the two-month hiatus since leaving France. I was barely proficient when time came for the first go in the F-4 with my instructor, Major Roland X. Solis, a Latin hot-head who flew like a helmeted cabaret dancer. I took a grudging liking to him, despite his penchant for flirting with death, e.g., the day he took me on his wing into a prolonged vertical climb that ended with both airplanes stalling and miraculously falling off at the same time in the same direction.

Once cleared for solo, I was assigned a backseater whose name I forget, but whom I remember as pleasant and competent, as we worked our way through basic aerial combat maneuvers, cross country navigation, aerial gunnery and missile delivery, air-to-air refueling, and air-to-ground bombing. When we reached the end of the program in late January, I felt marginally proficient but far from fully qualified in this powerful and diversely capable aircraft. My unease about taking my limited skills into combat was heightened by a sudden crisis in the Far East, when North Korea captured a U.S. surveillance ship, the Pueblo, and took the crew prisoner. My class was immediately put on hold for possible assignment to the peninsula, where tensions were sky-high.

Fortunately, that crisis passed and an assignment list arrived that routed us instead to various locations in the by-then very hot war in Vietnam. I, along with several classmates, was assigned to Danang, a large air base just below the border that divided the North and South. My orders also specified that I would attend the Air Force Water Survival School at MacDill AFB near Tampa, Florida, followed by Jungle Survival School at Clark Air Base, Republic of the Philippines, en route to Vietnam. Our F-4 training ended with a black-tie ball.
highlighted by the dinner speaker, Colonel Daniel ‘Chappie’ James, one of the Air Force’s few senior black officers. Following a stirring talk, he rewarded Dorene’s obvious appreciation by serenading her with, “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” He closed with an a cappella rendition of “Amazing Grace” that left the audience enraptured; it also foreshadowed my looming experience as a real fighter pilot. I would need all of the grace the Good Lord could spare.

F-4 training complete, we moved in with Dorene’s parents in Norwalk, who sheltered Brett and Lisa while Dorene and I went to MacDill for my water survival training. My Academy classmate Stu Boyd and his wife Marnie happened to be stationed at MacDill and invited us to stay in their base quarters even though they would be traveling. I looked forward to the training, knowing that in the event of an emergency requiring ejection in a coastal combat zone like Vietnam, the large bodies of adjoining water provided a fighter pilot the best hope of avoiding capture.

The school was rigorous and realistic; it culminated with students being strapped into a parachute harness and towed behind a fast-moving boat to simulate a water landing in high winds. The teaching point was to escape the harness before drowning, a condition whose onset the instructors were left to judge. I watched a number of classmates go well past what I thought was sure death before the boat was stopped and they were dragged from the water. When my turn came, I managed to keep my wits about me and got free in a few seconds. I rehearsed this new skill mentally time and again in the following weeks, an investment that would soon pay a huge dividend.

We returned to Norwalk feeling increasingly blue. A few days later, on the first of March, 1968, after a last, melancholy night together, Dorene and I said a forlorn farewell at LAX, where I had proposed five and a half years earlier. I boarded a military-chartered airliner for the Philippines to complete a week-long Jungle Survival School en route to Vietnam. On arrival at Clark Air Base, I was greeted with two pieces of news. The first was that my survival school class was full, so I would be held over a week; the second, a bit unsettling, was that my orders had been changed. I was now assigned to the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) at Cam Ranh Bay (CRB) Air Base, located well south of Danang. Although an F-4 outfit, the 12th had a complement of ‘C’ models, an earlier version that, though similar in appearance and power, was a generation behind in its electronics, especially its weapons computer. I was going to have to learn to bomb all over again.

I amused myself by going to Baguio to see if it was recognizable after seventeen years, which it was not. The streets were still clogged with the ubiquitous converted jeeps that served as the mainstay of public transit but I could
find no trace of where my family had stayed during our vacation eighteen years earlier. I was bored to tears by the time my training kicked off but gave my undivided attention to the initial classroom study and then field experience. The prospect of being downed over Southeast Asian jungle was very unappealing. The Viet Cong were an obvious threat, but here our instructors took delight in unveiling the seeming endless variety of other dangers lurking in this tropical horror show. Their favorite was the “one step” snake, so named for the interval between being struck and falling over dead. The final two days and nights were spent in the jungles of northern Luzon, where native teachers showed us how to find food and potable water, construct shelters, and evade capture. It was Boy Scout camp redux; I still hated it. As I boarded my flight to Vietnam, with all of the training behind me, the fact that it was now show time began to settle in. This was the real Air Force in real war. As the hours ticked by, I was seized by a powerful sense of foreboding – as well I should have been.

I could not have picked a more tumultuous time to begin my combat tour. On January 30th, 1968, North Vietnam, and its Viet Cong surrogates, launched the “Tet offensive,” a wave of coordinated attacks across the whole of the South, wreaking havoc, militarily, politically, and psychologically. Although extremely costly in terms of Viet Cong losses, the payoff for the North was to demonstrate the futility of U.S. efforts to secure the South. In America, protests against the war were multiplying, an outcry that would soon drive a broken Lyndon Johnson from office. As I came on the scene, tremendous pressure was being put on airpower to halt the flow of supplies from North to South, and on our ground forces to quell an insurgency unlike anything our troops had ever confronted. This was David versus Goliath, and David was winning on every front. We were following France’s footsteps into the maw of bitter defeat.

I arrived in Vietnam at Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut Air Base, home to Headquarters 7th Air Force, which bore the responsibility for the Air Force’s role in the air war in Southeast Asia. There were other U.S. aircraft engaged in the conflict, but because of interservice rivalry bordering on animosity, the vital airpower assets ostensibly at the disposal of the theater commander, General Westmoreland, were splintered. They were separately controlled by the Air Force, Navy, Army, and Marines. There was little joint cooperation in this conflict, a key factor in our abysmal performance as a military fighting force. This would become very apparent to me in the months to come.

The arrival process was chaotic. Hundreds of people milling about, long lines, unrelenting noise, stifling heat and mass confusion. I finally found a helpful sergeant who showed me where to sign up for transportation to Cam Ranh
Bay on a C-130 cargo plane leaving in two hours. I was one of a handful of passen-
gers, the only one bound for CRB, where we landed just at dusk. I stepped out to find myself on a vast concrete ramp filled with F-4 and C-7 transport air-
craft, but not a soul in sight. Base Operations was manned by a lone clerk who took no interest in me. My orders had not specified assignment to a particular squadron of the three comprising the 12th TFW. The clerk waved me in the direction of a cluster of aluminum hooches that looked like overgrown drain pipes split in half and welded end to end. A sign over the door of the closest proclaimed this to be the dormitory area for the 391st TFS. I pulled open the door and walked into another world.

The corridor running the length of the main hooch was some thirty yards long, with four-man rooms on either side. It was dimly lit, so I gingerly made my way toward the sound of raucous voices somewhere ahead. At roughly the half-way point, an exit opened onto a wood ramp leading into an adjacent hooch, light dimly flickering from the interior through its open entry. I edged my way to the door and peered inside a ramshackle party room, where at the moment, a porn flick was being screened. The room was filled with an eclectic collection of chairs, in which were sprawled an assortment of men in flight suits, all of whom looked to be in some stage of inebriation, some of whom were entangled with ladies who wore what looked to be nurses’ uniforms. When I was finally spotted at the door, the crowd erupted with vulgar shouts of welcome; ready or not, I was now in the land of the fighter pilot.

One of my new fraternity brothers detached from the mob, wrapped an arm around my shoulder, and surmised, correctly, that I needed a place to sleep until given my squadron assignment the next day. He steered me down the hall to one of the four-man rooms and pointed to a bottom bunk, where I crashed within minutes. Some hours later, I was wakened from a dead sleep by the smell of alcohol flooding my nostrils. I cracked open one eye and beheld the lurid face of a totally besotted man staring at me with unblinking intensity. Not imagining any good that could come from a conversation with this drunken specter, I feigned sleep. After several minutes, he staggered out, not having uttered a word. What in the world, I thought, have I gotten myself into?

When I awoke, whoever else might have spent the night in the room was gone. I showered, dressed and went to find the wing headquarters, where I encountered a Major Dick Burpee, the executive officer to the wing commander. We struck up a conversation, and I liked him immediately. He took me in tow to the personnel shop, directed that I be assigned to the 391st TFS, to which he was attached for flying, and then made arrangements for me to move in with three roommates, a seasoned captain, name lost, and two majors, Casey Jones
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and Bob Russ. The fighter pilot gods were looking out for me. Within a few short months, Bob Russ would take an initiative that determined the course of my career for years to come.

I was assigned to ‘C’ Flight, whose commander tried to make me feel welcome, although I sensed behind his southern drawl some uncertainty about this novice fighter pilot thrust upon him. Not having flown for nearly two months, my first requirement was to get combat-ready. I expected a local orientation program, akin to the one at Craig, covering unit rules, the flying environment, a typical mission, followed by an introductory flight. What I got instead was being thrown onto the operational mission schedule, accompanied for the first five flights by an instructor pilot in the rear seat. After that, I would be turned loose with a regular backseater who had been in theater long enough to know the ropes. Needless to say, I was extremely uneasy about this cavalier agenda.

The first mission was, to use a fighter pilot expression, “assholes and elbows,” a repeat of my initial flight at Craig five years earlier with my squadron commander, except this time with ten five-hundred pound bombs strapped under my airplane. I was number two in a flight of two F-4s, flying my lead’s wing, sweating bullets to hold position during the takeoff and departure, make the requisite radio calls and responses, change channels, manage my fuel, and keep my head in the game. We joined with a tanker about thirty minutes into the flight, where I watched my leader get his gas and managed to get mine without any premature disconnects. From there, we navigated to our target area, called up the forward air controller, or FAC, in his small, single-engine prop plane down in the weeds, and proceeded to drop our bombs on targets he marked with smoke rockets. I felt fortunate just to hit the ground, much less anywhere near his mark. It was not pretty, but it didn’t seem to make much difference to him. He complimented our work, rattled off a Bomb Damage Assessment that included destroyed bunkers and weapons storage areas which he could not possibly have counted so quickly or even seen at all through the dense foliage. I had my first insight into Vietnam, The Game.

By my final orientation flight, on the fifth of April, 1968, I was fairly comfortable with the typical flight routine, having finally mastered the differences between the F-4D and the F-4C. My flight lead was Major “Buck” Rogers, a seasoned fighter pilot; and my instructor pilot was Major Joe Kondracki, also an experienced fighter jock, who was content to sit quietly and let me fly. Since we were scheduled for bomb drops in North Vietnam, we joined with a tanker aircraft en route, a few miles south of the border between the two Vietnams, and just inland from the South China Sea. When we joined with our tanker, Buck moved into pre-contact position, while I took up an observation perch.
just above and behind his plane. He then moved smartly into contact position, the boom nozzle snapped into place in the receptacle on the spine of the F-4, just behind the rear cockpit, and he began taking on fuel. Given his reputation as a great stick, and the calm air that morning, I was surprised to see him having difficulty staying in the “envelope,” a limited area of movement that allows for small, transient position changes between the tanker and receiver during fuel transfer. Instead, his movements were quite pronounced and erratic, especially forward and aft.

Still, he managed to stay on the boom until he got his entire offload, then disconnected and swapped places with me. When the boom operator confirmed a good connection, I cleared him to begin refueling – and realized immediately that something was amiss. The moment fuel began flowing, I had to add power to maintain position, much more than the gradual increase normally required as my plane grew heavier with the additional fuel. Within a few seconds, I had advanced both throttles to the maximum power available, without using afterburner, to hold my spot relative to the tanker. Not a good situation. As we took on more gas, I told Joe that I would have to move one of the two throttles into afterburner range in order to keep pace with the tanker. That, as I presently recall, was not permitted, or was at least strongly discouraged by the flight manual, because afterburner power is difficult to modulate with the precision required for refueling. Rather than abort the mission, Joe and I agreed to continue for the additional minute or so required to take on the assigned load. Bad idea. Just as we finished topping off, I had to engage afterburner on the other engine, an even more precarious situation that was about to get very much worse. When I called the tanker to terminate refueling and initiate disconnect – no answer. We had lost radio contact. Without relief from the refueling pressure being transmitted through the boom, I could not continue to hold position without engaging yet another of the four stages of afterburner. No way. Time for a brute force disconnect, an emergency procedure that dictated a gradual reduction of power, easing our craft down and away while maintaining an optimum angle between the boom and the receptacle. At the limit of boom extension, the nozzle would be forcibly released from the receptacle. Good plan, bad timing. At the very instant I started to edge back the throttles from afterburner, the boom snapped in two, half remaining attached to the tanker, the other half permanently latched to my aircraft.

Freed from the backward push of the boom, our F-4 bolted forward under the tanker like a rock from a slingshot. I snatched the power back and managed to stabilize position, with my canopy inches from the belly of our airborne gas station and the tail of our plane filling the view screen of what must
have been a terrified boom operator. With every bit of calm I could muster, I eased out from under the tanker, then urgently scanned the instruments. The main fuel gauge, and the hydraulic and pneumatic indicators, were all dropping, but the flight controls were functioning. That comfort was short-lived. Buck Roger’s voice sounded in my earphones: “You are on fire.” My memory immediately dialed up another voice – my student at Craig, five years earlier: “Sir, we’re on fire.” Different world, same clarifying effect. A fully-fueled F-4, carrying ten five-hundred pound bombs and visibly aflame was a bad place to be. We delayed ejecting long enough to take up a heading toward the water, the delay creating an unexpected reprieve. As our turn took the sun out of Buck’s line of sight, he reported that what he saw as smoke was actually vapor, created by fuel pouring from the spine of our aircraft. Closer inspection now revealed that the half of the boom that had remained attached to the tanker had whiplashed, first up, and then down with tremendous force as our F-4 shot forward. The jagged pipe had torn through the spine of our plane, severing critical fuel, hydraulic and pneumatic lines at one blow.

Joe and I concluded that we could safely press on toward the water and review our options. By chance, we crossed the shoreline overhead Danang Air Base, and, since the aircraft was still controllable, decided we would attempt an emergency landing on its ten-thousand-foot runway. We advised Buck, who led us to a nearby bomb-jettison area a bit further out over the water. When we stabilized at the jettison velocity, I hit the release and felt a distinct jolt as the ordnance was unclipped and fell unarmed into the waiting South China Sea, two miles below. Our leader then called with a second piece of what proved erroneous information, i.e., that all of the bombs had cleared the aircraft. With that, I slowed to gear-lowering speed so we could check for three good wheels before giving up precious altitude. Now our problems began to multiply. I lowered the gear handle, but got “down and locked” indications only on the nose and right main; the left main gear still showed full up and locked, which Buck confirmed to be the case. The only recourse at this point was to try to force the stuck gear down with the one-shot emergency pneumatic bottle. I advised lead and pushed the activation button, at the exact instant he called to correct his earlier observation regarding the bomb jettison operation: “Hold off, you have a bomb on the centerline station.” In the morning haze over the coast, he had not seen the weapon still tucked under the belly of the aircraft until he moved in closer to check the gear lowering. Adding to that chilling news, the stuck gear did not respond to the emergency lowering procedure; hence, we were now faced with two insurmountable problems. All landing bets were now off, further affirmed by the sudden glow
of the red “low fuel” light that operates independently of the fuel gauge. That meant we were minutes from flameout, with two wheels down, one up, and a five-hundred pound bomb clinging to our underside. Now another voice from May 9th, 1963, rang in my ears: B.J. Frasier suggesting, “Why don’t cha’ll bail out?” My present mentor, Joe Kondracki, was equally aware that our situation was hopeless. On his direction, I advanced the throttles, climbed to fourteen thousand feet, and leveled the wings. Joe ejected forthwith, then I retrimmed the plane for hands-off flight, pulled the lever that allowed my canopy to fire free of the aircraft, reached down with both hands to grasp the ring that would initiate the ejection sequence, and gave it a swift, steady pull. As opposed to the T-33, whose seat was ejected with a spine-jarring jolt by a cannon shell, the F-4’s Martin-Baker seat was pushed up and out by a smoothly accelerating rocket. I peered down, briefly enthralled by the image of my plane, silhouetted against the water far below, seeming to fall away from me. I was snapped back to reality as two squibs fired, the first releasing my seat belt, and the second pulling taut the canvas strap that ran from the top of my seat, down behind my back, and then under my butt to the front of the seat. In a split second, I was freed from and then thrown bodily out of this wondrous Martin-Baker creation. Soon thereafter, as I fell through ten thousand feet, my parachute was automatically deployed by a barometric release and I was left floating gently in a South Asia breeze. Things had worked perfectly – at least for me; my backseater was in a world of hurts.

After verifying that I had a good chute, I looked down to find Joe, expecting to see the top of his canopy a thousand feet or so below. To my horror, what I saw instead was his collapsed parachute already in the water. The ride down from ten thousand feet would normally take several minutes, so something had obviously gone terribly wrong after he left the aircraft. I was so shaken by the prospect that he was dead, striking the water at terminal velocity, I got ahead of myself in preparing for my own contact with the waiting South China Sea. I inflated one side of my life vest as I had been taught at MacDill, delaying the other until safely down, to prevent losing both to some disaster during descent. The next step was to release the survival pack strapped to my butt so it would drop clear and not interfere with my landing. It would be retained for quick recovery in the water by a lanyard attached to my parachute harness. We were taught to delay its release until the last few hundred feet of the descent for a reason I was about to relearn.

Just as the pack dropped as far as the lanyard allowed, I entered a layer of turbulent, swirling air, a foretaste of the high winds at the water’s surface. The rotating currents grabbed the survival pack and began whipping it in a
circle, a motion that was quickly transferred to me. Before I realized what was happening below me, I had tilted my head back and looked up to check the canopy, concerned it might partially collapse in the now violent rushes of air. Suddenly, I began rotating in tandem with the survival pack, causing the risers that attached the canopy to the shoulder clips on my harness to wind together like a giant braid, and close rapidly down on my exposed throat. I undid my chin strap, ripped off my helmet and, with the strength that comes in crisis, I took a riser in either hand and pulled with all my might, managing to force my head back through the two straps before they closed tightly behind my neck – rather than on it.

Now helmetless, I continued my descent through the deafening wind, fighting back the rising anxiety over what was coming, knowing I could not afford another screw-up in what I had been taught at water survival: gauge the wave crests, be ready for impact, hands on the canopy quick-releases, get on your back, free yourself from the chute. All of that went exactly according to the manual. I hit the water in an optimum position, popped the releases and watched the canopy fly wildly away across the roiling seas. My brain was now in overdrive. I inflated the other side of my life vest, found the lanyard connecting me to the survival pack and quickly reeled it in. I located the CO₂ cartridge embedded in the side of the life raft that formed the core of the pack and pulled the lanyard, expecting the raft to balloon rapidly into shape. What I got instead was a pathetic “phisst.” Bad cartridge, new challenge: manually inflate the raft. I spent the next twenty minutes alternately swallowing seawater and blowing into the manual inflation tube. With the raft some three-quarters inflated, I realized I was fast running out of energy, weighed down by my water-saturated flight boots, flight suit, and survival vest while manhandling the awkward raft in the pounding seas. My best shot at this point was to close the manual inflation nozzle and pull myself as far aboard my poor excuse for a life raft as my remaining strength allowed. As I lay there exhausted, face turned slightly to the right in order to breathe, waves crashing across my body...I felt a powerful hand clutch my left shoulder. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest.

After a long second, I turned my face to the left and looked straight into the eyes of a handsome young man wearing an Air Force flight helmet and green flight suit. He put his face close to mine and shouted over the wind, “I’ve got you, son, everything is going to be all right.” I reached up with my left arm and, unable to talk, simply gave him a hug. He strapped me to his vest, and we were winched back to the HH-53 rescue chopper floating some thirty yards downwind that had been scrambled from nearby Danang Air Base.
to pick me up. As we lifted off, the pilot informed me that a second chopper had just located my backseater, a minute or so away. We arrived in the area as Joe’s body, parachute still attached, was being hoisted from the water by a grappling hook. Now, the full emotional impact of what had transpired over the past thirty minutes came crashing home. It was the lowest point in my life.

The trip to Danang took what seemed a lifetime. We landed a moment or two behind the other chopper, and as we taxied to parking, I steeled myself for what lay ahead. But, as the door to the compartment slid back, my heart made yet another enormous leap. There, with hand outstretched to assist my step down, stood Joe Kondracki, alive and not too much worse for wear. While we were being checked by the Flight Surgeon, Joe recounted his harrowing experience. Following his ejection, the sequence designed to automatically throw him from his seat had failed, requiring him to spend precious moments manually freeing himself — only to discover that his parachute deployment handle had become so tightly wedged in its stowage clip that he couldn’t budge it. Now in a tumbling freefall, he retrieved the knife encased in his survival vest, cut through the canvas retaining cover over the handle, yanked it clear, and then pulled it far enough to get a partial deployment before hitting the water. Despite the force of impact, he managed to inflate one side of his life vest before losing consciousness. I was blown away by his matter-of-fact recitation. This was Cool Hand Luke in the flesh.

We returned to Cam Ranh Bay that afternoon and were met planeside by the new wing commander, who had just arrived on station. I was grounded for a short period while the accident board did its work, which was greatly facilitated by our airplane’s post-ejection flight path. I was told that it had made a gentle descending turn and crashed, but remained sufficiently intact for the investigators to determine that the boom had been fused into the aircraft’s refueling receptacle, suggesting highly abnormal pressure being transmitted while fuel was flowing from the tanker. Beyond that, I know little about the outcome of the investigation, except that Joe and I were returned to flight status shortly thereafter, suggesting that the local board did not find fault on our part.

Once I was back in the air, life began to settle into a routine of three flights a week, usually with the same backseater, but with leads who varied widely in airmanship and concern for their wingmen. The best was Captain Ed Silver, a superb pilot with striking good looks who made being on his wing instructive and confidence inspiring. I went to school on him at every opportunity. The second lowest moment of my Cam Ranh Bay tour came as I walked past his room early one morning, and saw through the open door that his mattress was rolled up. Ed had been hit by enemy fire during a night
bombing run and gone down with his plane. His death had a lasting impact on me. I had imagined him invulnerable, too good a stick and too good a man to die in such an alien land for such an unworthy cause. Decades later, when I finally mustered the will to visit The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., his was the first of the names that I traced ever so gently. The pain returned undiminished.

My first flight after the accident was with my flight commander, who treated his number two like some sort of unwanted appendage. He was, I am sure, equally unimpressed with me as I struggled to keep up with his brusque leadership. However, his style was doting by comparison with the lead who ran off and left me to my own devices following a strike on a rail line in Route Pack One, the southernmost targeting region in North Vietnam. After his bombing run, he slammed the throttles into afterburner and hauled ass, barely visible on the horizon as I pulled up from my own pass. I climbed to altitude and tried to catch him, but operating in afterburner rapidly depleted my already low fuel state. Alarmed, I called in the blind (akin to “calling all cars”) for any tanker and was relieved to get a quick reply and a vector to its position.

As I neared the refueling area, clouds began to close in, making it difficult to keep the KC-135 in sight for the rejoin. With the red fuel low level light now on, I was totally committed to getting hooked up, which I managed to do just as we entered dense clouds. Taking on gas in the soup is normally an absolute no-no, because of the disorienting effect of the blind environment. I just gritted my teeth, locked my eyes on the guide lights in the belly of the tanker, and held on for dear life. When we were safely home, I paid a visit to the scheduler and asked never again to be paired with this so-called flight lead.

After ten missions, I was eligible to pull alert duty, which was served in a special facility just off the launch end of the runway where the assigned crews ate and slept, ready to go in an instant’s notice. Alert missions typically involved vital targets of opportunity, the most critical being “troops in contact,” that is, friendlies engaged in a close-quarters fire fight. My first mission was just that, the klaxon blaring at 2:00 a.m., jolting me awake from a fitful sleep. Already fully dressed, I headed for the door with my backseater right behind me and stepped outside into a driving rainstorm. We were soaked by the time we were strapped in and got our canopies closed. I managed to stay up with my leader’s pace, and we launched in trail formation, on a radar-guided departure through the dark, turbulent clouds. I was immediately pushed to the edge of my flying abilities.

We navigated to the target and began a letdown based on the FAC’s instructions, breaking through the clouds at two thousand feet to a scene
from Dante’s Inferno. Flares bathed the area in an eerie incandescent glow punctuated by streams of tracer rounds arcing across the opposing lines. There was no useful reference point for staying spatially oriented during our maneuvers as we jinked to avoid ground fire while getting aligned to deliver our ordnance. I told my backseater to stay glued to the attitude indicator and take control of the aircraft the instant it appeared I had lost orientation, which was my principal concern. Right behind that worry was getting my bombs on the bad guys and not the friendlies, which by the grace of God I did. War truly is Hell, and I wasn’t even on the ground where the worst of it takes place.

The only other mission that stays with me was also off the alert pad. We were launched in response to a fire fight centered on a housing compound on the outskirts of Saigon. On arrival in the objective area, we found a hazy sky further obscured by smoke rising from burning buildings. The FAC put his marker on the enemy location, one small structure surrounded by a host of others filled with friendly civilians, a nearly impossible target to strike safely. I went in so low on my first run that the bomb failed to explode, for lack of time to fuse before impact. I changed my run-in angle on the second pass and got my weapon right on the money. That piece of airmanship earned a stiff shot of bourbon back at the party room, and some weeks later, the Distinguished Flying Cross.

After fifty missions, I began my flight-lead check-out, an eagerly awaited opportunity to advance my credentials in the fighter community. I led five missions, under a variety of conditions, with an instructor on my wing. As the wheels touched down concluding the final flight, I felt a sense of accomplishment, having crawled one more rung up a ladder that still seemed very steep and very tall. Five months into the game, I was a more skilled player, starting to feel more competent in the air, albeit, way out of my comfort zone on the ground. Squadron life revolved around booze, porn flicks, and casual infidelity, not exactly my cup of tea. Instead, I spent long hours running, completing Air Command and Staff College by correspondence, and, as unit awards and decorations officer, pounding away at a manual typewriter to churn out an endless stream of recommendation packages that required a perfect original and five onion-skin copies. Lonely, caught up in an unprofessional, grab-ass operation marked by poor leadership, rampant careerism, and mostly pointless missions, I lost myself in tedious distractions. I missed Dorene terribly and wanted to see her more than anything else on earth. That opportunity now waited as I crawled out of my cockpit, a newly minted flight lead. It would be my last mission as a fighter pilot.
I was a bit surprised to see Bob Russ standing at the bottom of the ladder, but it would be like him to come give me a pat on the back. What he said instead was, “Go to your room and pack; you’re on a plane to Saigon in an hour.” Without my knowledge, but with my best interests at heart, Bob had submitted my name as a candidate for the position of aide-de-camp to the new commander of 7th Air Force, General George S. Brown. I had never heard of the man. In three hours, we would be having lunch together in his quarters at Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

General Brown was an imposing person, a bit over average height and build, but richly endowed with that elusive quality, gravitas. He was serious yet easy to like, with a ready smile and hearty laugh. Although not widely known in the field, he was a skilled Pentagon veteran and much admired in the Washington corridors of power. A 1941 West Point graduate, somewhat older than his peers with a year of prior civilian college, he chose the Army Air Corps, checked out in bombers, and was plunged immediately into World War II. He excelled as an aerial leader, winning the nation’s second highest decoration for heroism in recognition of his role in gathering the survivors of the disastrous raid on the Ploesti oil fields in Romania and leading them safely back to North Africa. Promoted to colonel in just three years, he retained that rank after the war ended, commanded the training wing at Williams, and then was thrust into the Pentagon environment, where he quickly came to the attention of the senior leadership. With brief transitions back to the field, he spent most of the fifties and sixties serving as the principal assistant to the Air Force Chief of Staff, then to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and finally, to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earl Wheeler. The job of Commander, 7th Air Force, was his first position as a four-star. He joined a war that was going from bad to worse.

General Brown lived in a one-story house inside a guarded, barbed-wire-encircled compound on Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. The house was positioned among several trailers housing his aide and senior staff. I arrived to find a fellow candidate, Captain Al Gagliardi, a 1959 Air Force Academy graduate, waiting in the quarters. I knew and liked Al from our Academy days. He was mature, sensible and steady; I thought he would make a terrific aide. The general arrived, greeted us warmly, and we sat down to lunch. Conversation was cordial and not particularly probing. He asked if we played bridge or tennis, to which I replied yes and yes, the second being a bit of a stretch. I was a solid bridge player, but had hardly touched a tennis racket since high school, where I was a bit beyond entry level. Lunch over, we shook hands and went our separate ways. I did not hold out high hopes, nor was I sure I wanted the
position. But when I landed at Cam Ranh Bay, Bob met me with the news: General Brown had selected me. I went immediately to the Military Auxiliary Radio Station and called Dorene. “Meet me in Hawaii in three days,” I said, “I have a new job.”
Dorene had been a busy girl while I was terrorizing the foliage of the Indochina Peninsula. J.O. was having increasing difficulty breathing suburban Los Angeles air, so she took charge of the problem, went house hunting, and found a tidy one-story, three-bedroom place in Hemet, a retirement community a bit south of Interstate 10 and just west of Riverside. She struck a deal with her parents whereby they would make the $4,000 down payment – most of their life savings – on the $23,000 home, and we would squeeze the monthly mortgage payment from my meager salary, with a little help from Jimmy and Buddy for a year or so until I got another bump up in pay. I learned about the purchase in one of Dorene’s daily letters: “Kids are fine, weather is good, I bought a house in Hemet.” She explained her reasoning during my hasty phone call, and it made great sense. That house turned out to be a huge boon for J.O. and Veda, for us and the children, and for our future financial well-being. I was struck by Dorene’s initiative and thoughtfulness. The decision and financial transactions could not have been easy. Having already witnessed her aplomb in dealing with the news of a second ejection, not to mention Minden, Louisiana, cops, I knew for sure I had married one tough, smart lady. She would have made a hell of a fighter pilot, a profession I was now about to trade for aide duties.

I caught a hop to Honolulu, took a cab to town, and scrambled to find a hotel room. By good fortune, I found accommodations in the first place I asked, the Ilikai Hotel, where on learning of my plight, the management gave us the honeymoon suite and its ocean view. I changed clothes and headed back to the airport just in time to meet Dorene, who was gingerly carrying one of Veda’s pecan pies. I had died and gone to Heaven, twice over.

We had a marvelous four days, the honeymoon we had missed six years earlier. I fell in love all over again as we celebrated with Don Ho’s tiny bubbles, enjoyed delicious meals at the hotel, and walked for hours on the beach. Grateful for this priceless interlude, Dorene and I again said goodbye, and l
boarded a plane back to Vietnam. Leaving her again was heart-wrenching, but the sadness was mitigated by the fact that half my twelve-month tour was behind me, as were the risks of combat flying. General Brown had made clear during the interview that he needed only an interim aide, as he had already selected the son of a longtime friend to serve in that position when he became available. A young captain like me, he was in pipeline status, with about six months of training still to go. To fill his shoes, General Brown wanted a captain with F-4 front-seat pilot experience and half a tour remaining. The tiebreaker between Al and me – we both fit those criteria – was that I spoke fluent French, as did the senior South Vietnamese leaders with whom General Brown would interact. This was the first of many dividends from my Olmsted experience. The downside was a growing conviction that we were on the same tragic path colonial France had trod, headed for an equally dismal destination.

At Cam Ranh Bay, I packed up my few belongings and caught a hop to Saigon. On landing, I was met by Senior Master Sergeant Bob Mauk, General Brown’s chief administrative assistant, who sat just outside his door and kept the paper flowing. In the same small anteroom sat Colonel Grady Friday, the executive officer, and now me. I liked Bob instantly. He was about my height and build, with reddish hair, thick glasses and a wry smile. I knew I was in the company of a consummate professional, knowledgeable, wise and discreet. He took me to the trailer I would share with the vice commander’s aide, where I dropped my things and headed back to the office. I was feeling anxious and uncertain about this new role, and I told Bob that straight out. “Not to worry,” he said, “I was, too, when I first joined General Brown. He is a wonderful man to work with, and I’ll help you learn how to best serve him.” Just when I needed another angel, one appeared at the desk right next to mine.

My predecessor, aide to General Spike Momyer, from whom General Brown had taken over, had left a set of notes in the top drawer of the desk I inherited. They were entitled, “How to be an Aide to General Momyer,” and I read them eagerly. In deference to a great man, I will omit the details, but what I took from it was that Momyer adhered to rigid routines, was meticulous in every aspect of his life, and was no fun to work for. More interesting to me was the breakdown of duties: supervise the driver and house aides, plan and execute trips and social events, and arrange whatever diversions my boss might need to gain some relief from the grim business of running an air war. I showed the notes to Bob, who assured me that General Brown was far more tolerable.

As for diversions, I soon understood the thrust of General Brown’s query about bridge and tennis. He loved both with a passion, playing cards on the
weekend and commanding the court every weekday from noon to one. My role was to arrange the bridge foursomes, of which I was a full-time member, and daily noon doubles tennis matches – which I managed to avoid until I could find a playing partner and get my game up to General Brown’s level. He was a fine athlete, skilled in several sports, including polo in his West Point days, where in his senior year he captained the team that lost the national championship match to Princeton. During the week, he liked the occasional evening movie, which I would set up and screen at the quarters. His taste ran to Westerns and other light fare that entertained without demanding much emotional or intellectual engagement.

Planning trips and making them happen as planned was at the heart of my responsibilities. We traveled through Indochina by T-39, a workhorse airplane originally built as a trainer but used mostly for executive transport. I joined General Brown just as he was beginning his tour of the theater, requiring travel to dozens of major flying units and smaller, specialized operations. We would also pay calls on American ambassadors and other high-ranking U.S. and allied officials, civilian and military.

Beyond the mechanics of the job, the more important dimension was anticipating General Brown’s needs, getting inside his head, knowing his likes and dislikes, reading his moods and body language, helping to create as much equanimity in his public and private lives as the demands of his job permitted. A good aide was selfless, thoughtful, discreet, and totally devoted to the well-being of his senior. By those measures, I was in trouble. The more I understood the job, the less certain I was that I was cut out for it. I was too independent-minded, inner-directed, and short on empathy to play the role of devoted man-servant. Despite Bob Mauk’s patient tutoring, which often lasted long into the evening, I was uncomfortable in the job, feeling too young, too inexperienced, and too intimidated by General Brown’s powerful presence. The only guidance he gave me was to watch, listen, and learn. I would attend every meeting in which he participated, except on the rare occasion when it was not appropriate, quietly monitor his periodic late-night phone calls from Washington, be his partner at the bridge table and on the tennis court when asked, and make the train run on time when I was in charge of his schedule.

The first of my shortcomings was partially mitigated when we met on the tennis court, where we always played on opposing sides. I had been able to get in a month’s worth of practice on another court during his noon matches at the quarters, and fortunately my dormant skills were rekindled. I had managed to put together a decent game, good enough to stay on the court with
the general and most of his partners. Then came the day when our doubles match fell through and we took to the court mano-a-mano. As the first set progressed, I picked up my game, to the point that I was playing way over my head. He was easily the better player, but I managed to stay with him, shot for shot, until the skin began to peel off my feet, layer by layer. I finally said, “Enough!” and he chided me gently for giving in. Then he saw my blood-soaked socks and realized I had played beyond the call of duty. I couldn’t help but think of those retread fighter pilots back at Willie smashing each other’s index fingers. Playing through the pain didn’t make me a better man, but I think it earned me a measure of respect in General Brown’s eyes. It marked a turning point in our relationship.

Despite the logistics hassles and constant worry over things going wrong, our trips were a continuing revelation about the war and the men who fought it. I paid close attention to the big picture, how each wing commander planned for and executed our visit, his manner, his mission briefing, how he interacted with his staff and troops at squadron level. The commander at Danang, Colonel Roberts, was especially impressive. He was comfortable with General Brown, but not too familiar, knew his mission and people in every important detail, kept his large tenant units happy and the sprawling base squared away. He was clearly destined for higher rank, and he earned the first of his four stars as he left Danang.

As promised, General Brown included me in almost every meeting he attended on these field visits, most memorably a private session with Ambassador Sullivan, the top U.S. diplomat in Laos. Notorious for running his own show, political and military, the ambassador was known at 7th Air Force as Air Marshal Sullivan. General Brown told me to take notes of what was said during the meeting and to hang on to them until he asked to see them. Shortly after our return to Saigon, he called me into his office, showed me Ambassador Sullivan’s cable to Washington reporting on support General Brown had allegedly promised, and then made his own report, pointedly questioning whether he and the “air marshal” had been in the same room.

Laos played a vital role in the air war, as I learned when we dropped in on Thailand’s Nakhon Phnom Air Base, hard on the Laotian border and host to a wing of WW II-vintage A-1Es, rugged, prop-driven air-to-ground attack aircraft ideal for strikes on targets buried under jungle foliage or on the rocky karst cliffs common to the region. Our arrival was rather inauspicious – General Brown had difficulty stopping the T-39 on the wet, pierced-steel-plank runway. The brakes finally held just as the nose gear dropped into the mud at the far end of the strip. The wing commander showed up at the door in his jeep as if
nothing were amiss, greeted us cheerily, and off we went on our tour, while his maintenance guys extracted, cleaned and repositioned the plane in front of Base Ops.

The tour was unremarkable until we headed for a remote, unmarked part of the base, where we suddenly came upon a long, multi-story cinderblock building with a paved parking lot filled with vehicles. As we walked through its door, I felt like Alice entering Wonderland. This was a modern, bustling, high-tech operations center, manned by an army of civilians, dressed in white shirts and ties, who ran a huge array of computers. Giant screens covered the walls of the command post, a darkened room that glowed with the eerie light of the equipment. We were in the heart of a highly secretive initiative known as McNamara’s Electronic Wall, the core of which was an array of camouflaged listening devices seeded by A-1s along the jungle trails that served as North Vietnam’s supply line through Laos to the South. These disguised black boxes were high-tech microphones, so sensitive they could detect trucks changing gears and the drivers shouting. The objective was to pinpoint the large staging areas where the drivers huddled during the day, awaiting the cloak of darkness to continue their journey. Air strikes would then be called in to destroy the vehicles en masse, a much more effective tactic than trying to pick them off one by one. As usual, the North Vietnamese were too clever to allow this tactic to succeed for any length of time. They learned to keep the trucks dispersed, and they resorted to transshipping cargo around bottlenecks with the backbreaking labor of men on foot, wheeling supply-laden bicycles. It was one more example of us not giving our enemy sufficient credit for ingenuity and determination to win at all costs, precisely the mistake made by the French fifteen years earlier.

Our next stop on this trip was elsewhere in Thailand, an F-105 base that also hosted a tenant unit providing support to the Electronic Wall. During our short visit, a young airman began a lengthy explanation of the Wall and his role in maintaining its listening devices. Just as I was about to short-circuit his presentation in the interest of sparing General Brown a repeat of the earlier narrative, Brown put his hand on my sleeve to keep me still. Ten minutes later, he warmly thanked the technician, and we went on our way. Back on the plane, just before he turned to take his seat at the controls, my boss gave me words of advice I would follow countless times over the rest of my career. “Lee,” he said, “never miss an opportunity to let a young airman demonstrate his pride in his work. That’s one of the most important things we do on these trips.” Point taken and frequently replayed in later years.

Once he was through the theater orientation phase, General Brown gave
his full attention to the task of applying air power more effectively. He was held in awe by members of the senior staff, who were very aware of his record and status as a leading contender for the position of Air Force Chief of Staff and perhaps Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Careers would be made or broken during his tour to an even greater degree than is normal at a four-star headquarters. These were serious but not very imaginative officers, with the exception of Brigadier General George Keegan, chief of intelligence, a brilliant, arrogant and profane man who headed an empire of analysts and intelligence gathering assets. Every morning briefing began with a presentation privately dubbed “Keegan’s Happy Snaps,” an array of aerial photographs taken the previous day by RF-4s, the reconnaissance version of my aircraft. To hear the intel chief, you would think the war was being won handily, which I knew not to be the case. To my mind, General Brown was curiously enamored of this man, whom I found most unappealing and from whom I stayed as far away as I could. Instead, I decided to get closer to the staff in order to find out what was really going on in the trenches, before deciding what, if anything, I should do about the disparity between what I had seen in the field and the rosy picture being painted at the headquarters. Sooner or later, something would happen to force the issue. In the meantime I would watch, listen, and learn, trying to be a better aide in the process.

That attempt got off to a shaky start when fate intervened to bring Bobbie Grace back into my life. A very late-night phone call rang simultaneously in General Brown’s quarters and my trailer. We both picked up to hear a voice say, “George...,” to which my senior replied, “Yes, sir,” assuming the call was from Washington. I knew better, recognizing the voice as Bobbie’s, calling me by my first name, as usual. I had not seen nor heard from him in over seven years. “General Brown,” I said softly, “I believe this one is for me.” Following the click on his line, I asked Bobbie what in the world he was calling me for at this hour. He replied, “I’ll be in your office at eight o’clock in the morning,” and he hung up.

At eight sharp, Bobbie strode into my office in camouflaged fatigues, jungle hat, and boots. “George, he said, “I need a fifty-gallon hot water heater, and I need it now.” “Well, sure, Bobbie, and why would you think I have a spare one of those handy?” “Just come with me; I have a car waiting.” And so we climbed into the taxi he had hired and were off to the supply squadron. Bobbie inquired as to the whereabouts of the sergeant major, found same, introduced himself, and then said, “George, give us a minute.” I stepped back into the hall wondering what on earth Bobbie was up to. In a moment, he came out of the office and said, “You can head on back to your desk; I’ve got it covered from
here.” “Bobbie, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what this is all about, particularly since I have the feeling you just used my four-star aide insignia to help close whatever deal you just negotiated.” “George, I’m the assistant chief of maintenance for my A-1 squadron. The dorm that houses my troops has only one hot water heater and that don’t cut it for a round-the-clock outfit. Now we have two. See you later.” With that, the sergeant emerged in a truck with a large crate strapped to the bed, Bobbie stepped up into the cab, and they headed for the flight line, where waited the C-27 short-haul airplane he had also managed to commandeer. Leadership in action.

If all that weren’t enough to make General Brown wonder what possible further aggravation I could bring to his life, Admiral John McCain, the four-star who headed Pacific Command, a vast geographical responsibility that included Southeast Asia and hence the war in Vietnam, showed up just in time to create another opportunity. He was the first of three successive high-ranking visitors to General Brown’s headquarters with whom I would directly engage, each of whom left a lasting impression – for better or for worse. Admiral McCain was an impish man, small of stature, filled with energy, and a chatterbox, waving his arms as he talked, omnipresent cigar clamped between his teeth or jabbing like a pointer between his fingers. He loved to play tennis, but only doubles, because his aide just happened to be a former professional. General Brown must have gotten a very inflated impression of my game after our earlier blood-letting, because he chose me to be his partner in the noon match. After a short warm-up period, during which it became obvious that McCain’s partner was a sandbagger, all blond and buffed, the admiral said, “Let’s go, George, you all start,” whereupon my trusting boss tossed the ball to me and stationed himself at the net, blocking most of my view of the service court where McCain waited, chomping on his cigar. I made a short prayer to the tennis gods, tossed the ball into the air, smacked it as hard as I could, and hoped for the best. No way. The ball flew as if guided by radar, struck General Brown squarely in the back of the head, rebounded high up and over the net, and landed at McCain’s feet, prompting him to shout gleefully, “Let ball,’ Butler; do it again!” When General Brown recovered his composure, he turned to me and growled, “God damn it, Lee, we’re on the same team.” The bronzed sandbagger watched all this unfold in utter astonishment.

However strange that goat-rope, it paled by comparison with my second close encounter with a senior uniformed leader, one which left me very unsettled with respect to the highly variable character of the men who ascend to the nation’s highest military posts – in this case, the sitting Air Force Chief of Staff, General J. P. McConnell. Like many top Air Force leaders of his era, he was
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a product of General LeMay’s Strategic Air Command, tough-minded, irascible, and as I would quickly find, profane (I have greatly underreported his actual words herein) and a heavy drinker. General Brown gave me instructions to stay by the Chief’s side every waking minute during his time at the headquarters. After greeting him upon his arrival, General Brown returned to his office and I accompanied General McConnell to his host’s quarters, where the guest room awaited for a brief rest after the long flight. I sat on the couch in the living room ready to do any bidding he might have, which was not long in coming.

“Butler,” he said loudly, “get back here.” I leaped to my feet and raced to the door of the room, but he was nowhere in sight. I knocked politely, eliciting another curt instruction: “Back here, damn it.” Realizing he was in the bathroom, I edged over to the door and peered discreetly inside, where sat the Chief of Staff on a porcelain throne. “See that briefcase on the dresser,” he said, and I nodded. “Well, go get me a full bottle to replace that empty one.” I noted the brand – Jack Daniel’s Black Label – and sprinted to the officers’ club just down the street, where a sympathetic bartender responded to my plea, no questions asked. When I returned to the quarters, the air was blue. “Butler,” he growled, yanking off the pair of khaki uniform trousers he had just donned, “these were supposed to be tailored before I left. Get it done and get them back here – NOW.” This time I needed the car, which General Brown had left at our disposal. I headed for a tailor shop just outside the gate, trying to figure out en route how much to tailor and where. I guessed the legs were too long, since there were black heel marks on the inside a bit up from up from the bottom. I told the tailor to take them up an inch, which he did in record time. I tore back to the house, out ten dollars on top of the twenty I had spent for the booze. By some miracle, the trousers fit, but my trials weren’t over yet. As he walked toward the door, McConnell turned and said, “One more thing, my son wants a new lens for his camera. See if you can find one.” No way could I guess this one. “Sir,” I asked, “do you happen to know what kind of camera he has and what size lens he wants?” Upset by my question, but realizing it was perfectly reasonable, he spun on his heel, grabbed the phone and barked into the receiver, “Get me my son.” The operator had been briefed to expect anything, and she responded like a champ. Within seconds, I heard, “Tell Butler here what the hell kind of lens you want,” and then the phone was in my hands. A sleepy voice on the other end mumbled, “Nikon, one hundred millimeter.” I spent much of the next day chasing down the two-hundred-and-seventy dollar lens, getting it into the Chief’s briefcase just before he departed. The next morning at breakfast, General Brown asked with a wry smile, “How’d you get on with General McConnell?” I glared at him and replied, “I have a
problem. He owes me three hundred dollars for a bottle of booze, some tailoring, and a camera lens.” Without a hint of sympathy, he nodded and said, “That is a problem.” I figured that was the price of poker in this league, but two weeks later a thank-you note arrived with a check fully covering my expenses. I sent it in to the commander’s office with a smiley face drawn at the bottom. He had my back the whole time.

My final encounter was with a familiar face: the former Air Force Chief of Staff, now George Wallace’s vice presidential running-mate, General Curtis E. LeMay, whom I had not seen since the night of the Honor Squadron banquet at Ent AFB in June of 1961. He had gone into retirement angry and resentful about the Bay of Pigs debacle, Kennedy’s refusal to strike Cuba, and the unfolding disaster in Vietnam. Being a hero in the eyes of many, the Wallace campaign imagined him the perfect choice to add weight to their ticket. They were seriously deluded. LeMay was horribly miscast as a politician, given to rants about “bombing North Vietnam back to the Stone Age,” reviling his opponents at home and abroad, and driving the media into a feeding frenzy. Acting as his aide during his visit to 7th AF Headquarters, I was pleasantly surprised with his Saigon press conference where he acquitted himself well, despite being bullied by the reporters. Sadly, all he wanted was a platform to voice his concerns, but by the end of the campaign he had tarnished a truly remarkable career, looking the buffoon and being taunted by critics who weren’t worthy to walk in his shadow.

I took away important lessons from each of these three episodes. The first was Admiral McCain’s remarkable composure, personal and professional, in the face of his son’s captivity in a North Vietnam prison, a prolonged ordeal that left the younger man with lifelong physical limitations. The few hours with General McConnell helped steel me for an incident some ten years later, as a young colonel in the Pentagon, when I would be treated far more rudely by a senior officer who directly threatened my career. Watching the retired General Curtis LeMay face down a pack of reporters was an object lesson I would revisit nearly thirty years later when I was myself drawn into the political arena as a retired four-star with a large axe to grind.

As 1968 drew to a close, General Brown gave me a delayed Christmas present. One day in late December he called me into his office to tell me that he was going back to the States in January for an annual four-star conference to be held at Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico. Traditionally, he said, aides weren’t invited to this particular meeting, but I was welcome to go along to Washington, and what I did from there was my business; just be back in Vietnam in ten days. Ecstatic, I called Dorene and then set about planning the trip.
When we arrived at Andrews, I got General Brown off to Ramey and myself on a hop to Nellis AFB, just outside Las Vegas. Dorene had driven up and booked a room at the Sands, where a memorable reunion was made the more stirring by a stage show serenade from Dorene’s idol, Sammy Davis, Jr. On returning to Hemet, I was overcome by emotion on seeing Brett, Lisa and the folks. I relished our brief time together. I also loved the house Dorene had bought, situated on Campus Way, and how much it meant to J.O. and Veda. Seeing the five of them living there, I felt comforted and deeply grateful to her parents for taking on this responsibility. It was a very fortuitous arrangement, one that would serve us well for many years to come. However, this respite from the war zone also provided a poignant reminder of how much I was missing as my family’s story was being written in my absence. Brett had started kindergarten, leaving Dorene to put him on the bus while concealing yet another tiny heartache. She and her parents nursed Lisa through sequential bouts of chicken pox and Asiatic Flu, taking turns holding her in their arms for a week, day and night, while she struggled back to health.

Back in the war zone, the conflict was going from bad to worse. Richard Nixon was now in office, surrounded by a circle of advisors and senior cabinet officials as amoral and mean-spirited as Washington had seen until then. The pressure from the White House was relentless, and it began to wear on General Brown. He was receiving angry midnight phone calls about the volume of enemy truck traffic, which all of the billions spent on McNamara’s Electronic Wall had failed to dent. One evening at dinner, out of left field, he said, “The staff is recommending I strike the South Vietnamese villages where the North has taken to parking their trucks overnight.” Shocked, I replied, “You can’t do that.” “Why not, might I ask?” “Because it is tantamount to declaring war on innocent civilians. That is morally intolerable.” General Brown was now visibly upset. “How many Americans do you think will be killed by the ammunition on those trucks?” Now I was upset. “You get paid for thinking more broadly than that. At a human level, trading the lives of friendly noncombatants for those of American soldiers is a distinction without a difference. We are here to secure these villages, not murder their residents.” Red Alert. General Brown put down his napkin, got up, and left the table. I returned to my trailer and spent a sleepless night, by turns angry and anxious. I was anxious for the fate of the villagers and pretty damn uncertain about my own.

We never spoke another word on the subject, but it clearly affected our relationship. Other events piled on to make General Brown’s mood even darker, and then I was given an insight as to how spontaneously tragic news can arrive. As we sat watching a movie in the quarters one evening, the command
center line rang, never a welcome sound. A C-47 filled with American military troops, en route to Hong Kong for a brief period of R and R, had crashed in bad weather, killing everyone aboard. I knew how hard this type of news hit him. He personally signed letters of condolence to the next of kin for every casualty 7th Air Force suffered, and he now faced a flood of the dismal correspondence as the dead were slowly recovered and identified over the next several days. I could only imagine what this duty entailed for the senior Army commander, General Abrams.

I was witness to one more, colossal example of poor staff work before I left General Brown’s side. Out of curiosity, I slipped into an afternoon briefing noted on the schedule as “Weapons Test,” sponsored by the director of operations and presented by an Air Force Systems Command team that had flown in from the States. I listened, fascinated, as the skilled and enthusiastic briefer waxed long about the virtues of the “propane bomb,” a Fuel Air Explosive originally perfected by the British that had killed legions of sheep in the deserts of a New Mexico test range. The bomb, nothing more than a metal cylinder filled with propane under high pressure, was fitted with a long spike at the nose, a set of stabilizing fins and a parachute at the tail. Designed to be dropped from an A-1, the weapon was launched in a steep dive, brought to vertical by the parachute deploying shortly after release, and, on impact, secured in an upright position by the spike plunging several feet into the earth. The landing jolt released the propane through ports spaced evenly around the circumference of the cylinder, the gas propagating in a large circular cloud. After a precisely timed delay, a cluster of grenade-like detonators was released into the cloud, igniting the propane in a devastating explosion.

At the close of the briefing, General Brown asked, “When and where do we conduct the in-country tests?” “In three days, sir, in conjunction with Operation Clean Sweep up in I Corps.” The general almost came out of his chair. “Are you telling me you plan to test this thing in conjunction with a live military operation?” “Well, yes, sir,” said the ops director, taken aback by the tone of his boss’s voice. “No,” said General Brown, “this is not the desert. We’ll test first in the Delta, then the jungle, and finally the mountains. I want you to find representative but remote locations, and we’ll take this a step at a time. Set up the initial test, and I will come personally to witness it.” Two days later, we were up at 4:30 a.m. for a T-39 hop to our southernmost airstrip, where we transferred to a helicopter, accompanied by the directors of ops, plans, and the test itself. We flew for another hour, accompanied by an armada of escort aircraft flying air cover, taking pictures, and carrying other staff types, finally reaching the test area deep in the Delta around 10:00 a.m.
Right on schedule, a lone A-1 appeared. The pilot set up for his run-in, nosed over and launched the weapon-to-end-all-war. The drogue chute deployed, the bomb slowed and rotated into a perfect vertical dive, plunged into a water-filled rice paddy and disappeared from view. A few seconds later, a belated orange flash burped through the surface of the paddy, creating a modest ripple. “That,” said General Brown, “obviously didn’t work so well. Let’s see if we can find a dryer spot and try the next one.” Dead silence in the helicopter until the ops deputy confessed, “Sir, we brought only one bomb.” More silence. General Brown turned his head slowly and deliberately, surveying the fleet of aerial machines darkening the sky, and then dryly observed, “I guess we might as well go home.”

The two remaining tests fared equally poorly. On the second test, the drogue chute ensnared itself in the triple canopy jungle, and the exploding gas did nothing more than denude the tops of several dozen trees. Finally, in the mountains to the northwest, the spiked nose bounced off the impenetrable rock, taking the bomb on a wild, futile tumble down steep, craggy slopes. The venture proved costly, ineffectual, and embarrassing. I filed it away in my growing storehouse of lessons learned.

General Brown’s job was not made any easier, nor his mood any better, by the atrocious lack of coordination between the military services in their applications of air power. The Navy had a substantial presence in the region in the form of Task Force 77, a carrier-centered armada in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Marines also had a significant air-to-ground capability, in keeping with their Air-Ground Team doctrine, according to which the Marine forces on the ground are always provided air support by closely allied Marine aviation. Finally, the Army had swarms of helicopters performing a variety of roles, most importantly, supporting the Air Cavalry, successor to the horse-mounted cavalry that had once been the pride of the War Department. Each of the military services jealously guarded its assets, and they all fought over roles and missions at every level from the Pentagon to the battlefield, even at the expense of American lives and tactical success.

General Brown was no stranger to these doctrinal wars, having spent so much of his career in Washington, and now he got to see the consequences at first hand in a real war. He made a valiant effort to improve matters, having been briefed by his predecessor, General Momyer, a master air power theoretician and highly experienced combat leader, who had left his post immensely frustrated by the endless interservice wrangling. Trying better to understand the Navy’s reluctance to coordinate air operations, which had resulted among other things in North Vietnam’s territory being divided into separate Air Force
and Navy target zones (called “Route Packages”), we paid a visit to Navy three-star Admiral Ralph Cousins, commander of Task Force 77, aboard the carrier that served as his flagship. We flew to Danang and transferred to a Navy C-1 COD, a twin-engine, propeller-driven administrative aircraft used to ferry people, mail, and light cargo to and from carriers.

I had experienced only one previous landing on a carrier, sitting in the back seat of a Navy T-28C during a cadet orientation trip, an experience I never cared to repeat. The landing in the COD was a bit less of a nail-biter, but the technique was much the same, driving the aircraft full tilt into the deck and advancing the throttle while simultaneously snatching at the arresting cables, completely antithetical to my Air Force piloting instincts. We stepped out of the plane and into another world, walking from one eye-opening revelation into another. First was the intensity of carrier operations, a non-stop bedlam of activity, exquisitely orchestrated, but dangerous in the extreme, conducted atop a floating fuel tank and ammunition depot. The round-the-clock launch and recovery cycle was thunderously noisy at every level of the carrier, punctuated by the rhythmic cocking and firing of the steam-powered catapults that hurled the combat-loaded fighters into the air. Space aboard ship was at a premium, leading to any number of compromises, such as “hot bunking,” where two able-bodied seamen rotated on and off of the same mattress as they replaced each other at shift change. Stairs were steep enough to be called “ladders,” corridors were narrow with low overheads, and tripping hazards were ubiquitous.

Equally foreign to me in this tiny slice of sea-going U.S. sovereignty was the caste-like division among ranks, to the extreme of white lines painted across hallways to prominently demarcate “Officer Country,” reminding the non-commissioned masses that the sanctuary beyond was off-limits without specific authorization or duty requiring entry. This centuries-old protocol may be deemed essential to good order and discipline in the shipboard Navy, but is wholly at odds with the informality and close professional relations between Air Force officers and the airmen and NCOs whose contributions to the mission are every bit as important. I found it off-putting, offensive even, but I was there to observe, not to criticize.

The imperiousness implicit in this stratification was made more explicit still in the admiral’s mess, which would have done justice to a royal court of any age. The table was set with fine white linen and monogrammed silver, with a bevy of Filipino attendants, resplendent in their mess livery, ready to respond to every need. The menu was sumptuous, our five-course lunch taken from the pages of Admiral Cousins’ personal tome, *Recipes from the Tonkin*.
I couldn’t help but think about the Army grunts choking down field rations in some steamy jungle with mud up to their ankles, while I sat there in my oceangoing Tour d’Argent. We departed the next morning after a brief side trip to visit the battleship *Missouri*, brought back into service to hurl shells the weight of a small car some twenty miles into Vietnam. Never could get my head around that logic, but I came away with a newfound appreciation for the role of the carrier. The flexibility this floating war machine brings to U.S. power projection is in my view irreplaceable, some Air Force arguments to the contrary. General Brown did not reveal his own conclusions about the Navy air operations, but by then it was probably the least of his worries.

Back at Tan Son Nhut, my replacement, Jack, the permanent aide, arrived the first week of March, and just in time – General Brown and I were about to drive each other crazy. Meanwhile, with one month left on my tour, and having license from General Brown to do whatever I wanted, I went to work in the targeting shop, where intelligence and operations come together to build missions for the aircrews in the field. It took only a short while to confirm my doubts about the utility of the glitzy Happy Snaps the intel chief brought to daily staff meetings. The lengthy interval required to process the intelligence in the photographs often meant that the missions scheduled to strike the targets revealed did little, if any, damage. We were putting men and machines at risk at great cost for very little return. Strike reports were being inflated to save face and keep headquarters happy. A significant fraction of our air operations was a sham. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt by the time I departed the headquarters that this was a war we were destined to lose, largely by our own doing.

By the end of March, I was more than ready to leave Vietnam. Jack arranged a lovely farewell dinner at the quarters for the three of us and a handful of senior staff members whom I held in special regard. General Brown said some very nice, even touching, words, and I retired that evening with a somewhat more optimistic impression of our time together.

The test of my optimism came in my Officer Effectiveness Report, which I did not see until after my return to the States. A copy arrived in an envelope from Bob Mauk, who took an initiative on my behalf that ranked with a young airman buying me a quart of chocolate milk, and M. Henri-Greard giving me a reprieve from failing the Sciences Po admission test. Bob managed to get my OER to a board considering captains for promotion to major just as I was departing Vietnam. The report was mixed: all of the blocks conveying various aspects of my performance were marked “Outstanding,” except “Judgment,”
which was graded down one notch to “Excellent.” That didn’t really surprise me, given our several disagreements on matters both small and consequential. However, the word picture he wrote to describe my potential made clear his confidence in my capacity to take on increasing responsibility.

I felt about the OER much as I did my diploma from Sciences Po. It wasn’t perfect, but it was good enough. I had again survived very tough duty, grown a great deal in the process, remained true to my principles, and benefited once more from the kindness of strangers. My life was taking on a pattern of unanticipated, hugely challenging opportunities, marked by bizarre and occasionally death-defying episodes, and success against long odds. I departed Vietnam two months shy of my thirtieth birthday. I had overcome the innate prejudices of my upbringing, triumphed over the rigors of a military school for which I was largely unsuited, hung on by my fingernails in a graduate program where I had no business being enrolled, survived ejection from two crippled airplanes, and won the grudging respect of a hallowed four-star Air Force officer. Through it all, I was sustained by the constants in my life: my values, my marriage, my children, and the angels who appeared when I needed them most.
On my return from Vietnam in March, 1969, Dorene met me at Travis AFB in northern California. I changed into civilian clothes at the passenger terminal, rather than subject myself to the animosity by now being displayed toward Vietnam veterans, adding insult to the terrible injuries many of them had suffered in service to their country. We had our third and final reunion in the course of this war, which was tearing at the fabric of our society, had taken the lives of too many friends, and damn near had taken mine. I was grateful to be back in the bosom of my family, to see Brett and Lisa, and to enjoy Veda’s cooking. I had two weeks of leave before reporting for my next assignment as an instructor in the Political Science (Poly Sci) Department at the Air Force Academy, a commitment I had made to Colonel Wes Posvar when he had made a swing through Paris during my last year at Sciences Po. This was a perfect interlude to gracefully reinsert myself into the children’s lives and decompress from the war. We traded in the Mustang, which together with a check for $3,400 from savings I had put away over the last year, bought a brand-new dark-brown Camaro Rally Sport with a simulated leather top and a 302-horsepower engine. After an initial spate of electrical problems, this classic machine performed like a champ. It was our only car for the next ten years and has since become a permanent member of our family, residing in fully restored glory in Lisa and Mike’s stable of vehicles.

Just days before my intended departure for Colorado Springs, I contracted the mumps, which quickly dropped and put me out of action for two weeks. Shortly thereafter, Dorene’s father, J.O., joined me in my misery. We were, ahem, a real pair. As soon as the Flight Surgeon at nearby March AFB cleared me to travel, I set out in the Camaro for the Academy, where I went straight to the housing office and was fortunate to be able to arrange for three-bedroom quarters in Douglas Valley, one of two large clusters of homes sprinkled along the series of ridges and valleys that divide the Academy’s 17,500 acres into functional corridors. That done, we arranged for Dorene’s move from Hemet
and were soon ensconced in our modest duplex, one of several arrayed around the perimeter of a cul-de-sac roughly halfway down the valley and two blocks from the elementary school where Brett would start first grade.

The government duplex was a life saver, as we could not have afforded a house off base. More than that, my commute took only five minutes, which made Dorene’s job as chauffeur more tolerable on days when I couldn’t find a ride with a fellow instructor. Finally, living on the Academy grounds gave us a built-in social life and support network, plus easy access to the BX and commissary essential to our tight budget. By all rights, this should have been a carefree assignment. Not a chance.

Although I did not immediately realize it, the Academy was in the grip of a crisis, dating back to a sweeping Honor Code scandal in 1965 that continued to infect the cadet wing. Relations among the three central instructional elements of the institution – academics, military training and athletics – were strained to the breaking point, as each sought to dominate the most precious teaching asset: cadet time. The previous dean of faculty, Brigadier General McDermott, had retired in the wake of the scandal, replaced by the more affable head of the Chemistry Department, Brigadier General Woodyard. Military training, led by the Commandant of Cadets, had for years been in a state of flux. This element was now in the hands of Brigadier General Robin Olds, lifelong fighter pilot, World War II and Vietnam hero, wild man, and the sixth commandant since the Academy opened its doors fourteen years earlier. The director of athletics was Colonel Frank Merritt, who lacked his competitors’ rank but exercised a major influence over cadet life because of his strong personality and the central role that sports – especially football and its charismatic coach, Ben Martin – played in attracting quality candidates to the Academy. Presiding over this triumvirate was the superintendent, Lieutenant General Tom Moorman, soon to be replaced by Lieutenant General A.P. Clark, a tall, lanky redhead, thoughtful, serious-minded and quite unaware of the soap opera which he was about to inherit. In a few months, I would be playing a leading role in this drama.

The Poly Sci Department was led, to the extent that was possible, by Colonel Dick Rosser, Posvar’s successor. Rosser presided over an eclectic crew of instructors, many of whom had a collective reputation as left-wing, dissident liberals. I joined this cast of diverse personalities late in the academic year, with no immediate role and none on the horizon, as the department was overstaffed. At my first department meeting, with Colonel Rosser presiding at the head of a very long table in a crowded conference room, I squeezed into a seat along the wall at the foot of the table, finding myself next to Major
Dave Goodrich, a ’59 grad and my neighbor in our cul-de-sac. Dave was terribly bright and very serious-minded, promoted to major ahead of his contemporaries. He was viscerally pessimistic, with a dark sense of humor to match. My introduction to it came at the end of the meeting when, in reply to Rosser’s perfunctory closing comments, Dave muttered a barely audible and cleverly articulated, “F*** you very much.” Rosser responded with a smile and wave for what he heard as a compliment. Dave gave me a sly wink. I loved this guy.

In late May, the Air Force-wide promotion list to major was announced and my name appeared among those selected “below the zone,” doing wonders for my morale. That said, I was still only one of the many Poly Sci instructors toiling in one of the many cubicles in the rabbit-warren inhabited by the department’s rank and file, and for the moment I needed something meaningful to do. That came in the form of an off-the-wall task from Colonel Rosser that took me and a fellow newcomer, Captain John Endicott, quite by surprise.

The Air Force was undertaking a history of its role in Vietnam, a major effort to chronicle the massive application of airpower. It was intended to serve multiple purposes, not the least of which was to make a case that the Air Force deserved the lion’s share of the credit for what our leaders still imagined would be future victory, thereby strengthening the claim for supremacy in the Pentagon’s constant budget wars. Having just returned from the theater of operations with a broad perspective of the conflict, I was a good choice for the work, as was John, a superb scholar with sound credentials for historical documentation of this sort. We were a strong team. After an orientation visit to Maxwell AFB, Alabama, home of the Air University, which was managing the project, we quickly put together an intelligent work program. Although a far cry from what I had anticipated, the task was intriguing and would allow me to deepen my understanding of the war as seen from the highest reaches of the Air Force. Ultimately, that understanding only confirmed my view that the nation’s strategic assessments of the war and how to fight it had been fatally flawed, dooming us to failure.

Our efforts consumed the summer of 1969 and the early weeks of the fall semester. Then came a call at home on a Friday evening from my supervisor informing me that as of Monday morning, I would take over five sections (classes of some twenty cadets each) of American Government 101, a course that all cadets were required to take. The prior instructor had just been canned for leading his 8:00 a.m. class out of their classroom and down the halls singing the Mickey Mouse song. Go figure. “It might be wise,” my supervisor said, “if you came by the department and picked up a copy of the American
Government 101 syllabus and textbook.” I had less than sixty hours to prepare my first lesson plan in a subject I had not studied in eight years, using a text I had never read, five lessons into a semester that was already underway. It was Sciences Po all over again, but at least it was in English.

My earlier training and my six months of experience as a classroom instructor at Craig got me through the first several weeks. Teaching was a good fit for my intellectual curiosity, public speaking skills and latent acting ability. I liked cadets and soon earned their trust and respect in and out of the classroom. Making the rather boring textbook and unimaginative syllabus interesting was the greatest challenge; I drew heavily on current events, supplementary material, and films to make the material come alive. I don’t know if my students ever realized I was learning their lessons at the same time they were, but they responded well to my instruction and began to open up about their lives outside the classroom. What I heard was very troubling. The mistrust and internecine warfare among the major elements of the Academy were spilling over into cadet life, which was marked by overloaded schedules, poor officer leadership, and a breakdown in discipline within the cadet squadrons that formed the core of cadet experience. Another Honor Code scandal that would shake the foundations of the institution was brewing, and when it came, it thrust me into a firefight with America’s Vietnam air war hero, Brigadier General Robin Olds.

As the semester progressed, I got to know well many of my fellow instructors, as talented but eccentric a group as I had ever encountered. Before joining the department, I was uncertain about how I would measure up intellectually with what I knew to be a handpicked elite, the latest residents in Colonel Wes Posvar’s legendary stable of academic thoroughbreds. On closer meeting, they proved far more disparate in smarts, officership, and just plain common sense than I would have ever thought. Our ranks included a career civilian State Department officer, an Army and a Navy exchange officer, and a preponderance of Air Force officers, some of whom had earned doctorates, but most like me, with a master’s degree and solid operational backgrounds. Three of the more senior officers, Lieutenant Colonels Ray Coble, Ed Bozik and Perry Smith, would play pivotal roles in my career, during this Academy tour and later in Washington. Captains Ted Warner and Erv Rokke and Lieutenant Bill Dickey were extraordinary intellects whose paths would intersect with mine for decades to come. I gradually became more comfortable among these outstanding officers, all of whom had shinier academic credentials than mine, and some of whom had already published significant articles and books.

As the semester ended, another unusual opportunity arose that I found
irresistible. The military training side of the business, better known as the Commandant’s Shop, needed executive officers to fill new positions created to support the group commanders, four colonels who each supervised ten of the forty 100-man squadrons comprising the wing of cadets. This would give me a look into life on the other side of the infamous Terrazzo Gap, a term that succinctly captured the fractured relationship between the teaching faculty and the Air Officers Commanding (AOCs), who were responsible for day-to-day oversight of the cadets.

By the luck of the draw, I reported to the 3rd Group Commander, a career fighter pilot with a reputation for loving life, liquor, and the ladies. That said, we hit it off from the get-go. I was eager to take on as much responsibility for managing the group as possible, and he was happy for me to do so. His idea of leading cadets was to give them almost free rein. Unlike Major Patch, who had discreetly kept his finger firmly on the pulse of the 13th Squadron while letting me run it, my new boss’s style was to jolly the cadets at his riotous and vulgar Commander’s Calls but otherwise leave them to their own devices. Big mistake. These young men had the same orgiastic urges as their counterparts on the nation’s restless college campuses of the late 1960s; they were expert at gaming the system and had now been given a license to steal.

The ten AOCs of 3rd Group were, by and large, a great bunch, but not all of them understood that their superior’s carefree stewardship put an extra burden on them to keep their flock from straying too far from the regulation book, which, I noted, had grown to voluminous proportions since my days as a cadet squadron commander. Some feared the group commander’s wrath if they governed too tightly and so adopted his insouciance; others managed to strike the balance between deference and dominance. My model AOC became Lieutenant Colonel Mike Dugan, who served in 4th Group, whom I met in the course of my duties. Mike was a career fighter pilot with a stiff crew cut – hence, his nickname, “Brush,” – a crisp, slightly mocking tone of voice, and an imposing physical presence. He exuded confidence and competence, much like my AOC, Major Patch, but with a sense of humor, equally effective but less brusque and more approachable. We had a terrific chemistry, as did Dorene and his wife, Grace, and all of our children. While there was no way I could have foreseen it, my early kinship with Mike Dugan, who would later become the Air Force Chief of Staff, would prove as important to my career as my relationship with General George Brown. Both of these men were towering figures, whom fate would not treat kindly at the pinnacle of their long and valiant service.

Whatever the lackadaisical leadership in 3rd Group might have done to
boost cadet morale, it was more than offset by the mercurial, tempestuous persona of the Commandant, Brigadier General Robin Olds. He had just pinned on a star for the second time in his long career, having lost the first after an unauthorized aerial demonstration unwittingly performed in front of his two-star boss who had arrived unannounced to surprise him with news of the promotion. Olds was legendary for his combat leadership in Vietnam, thus the powers that be had pictured him as the perfect role model to mold the future leaders of the Air Force. They were dead wrong. He was an unmitigated disaster. General Olds proved incapable of situational leadership, perceiving the cadet wing as just another fighter pilot outfit that would be awed by his reputation, follow his lead without question, be disciplined in duty and rambunctious, within unspoken bounds, at leisure. No way was that going to happen. Married to a fading actress, Ella Raines, and himself no less a prima donna, Olds unsettled the cadets with his inconsistent decisions and odd behavior. He had no feel for the mentality of these eighteen-year-olds, sequestered in an all-male world with its myriad rules and competing demands for their time and loyalty. Events were spiraling out of his control. He was helpless to stop them and was becoming increasingly erratic.

Two months into my duties as 3rd Group exec, I got a graphic look at how badly the cadet chain of command had broken down, at least in this Group. A 4th Classman (freshman) in one of our squadrons had been killed in an automobile accident while returning from a party off base, and my boss appointed me the Summary Court Officer, responsible for determining the circumstances and settling financial and other executor-related matters. My findings were deeply troubling. The deceased had been at an off-base party with upperclassmen, had drunk a large quantity of alcohol although underage, and had left in a van driven by a 1st Classman (senior), who predictably went off the road and into a steep gully, killing his passenger. My investigation soon revealed that the victim had other bad habits, such as borrowing money from his squadron mates, a practice that confirmed my belief that his squadron had become a big, out-of-control fraternity. I pulled no punches in my report, and my boss was visibly shaken by its contents. He undoubtedly knew it was a veiled indictment of his leadership, even though I had cast it in a scrupulously objective, “just the facts, Ma’am,” tone.

I was asked to write one other report during my brief tour in the Commandant’s Shop, in the aftermath of a second Honor Code scandal that broke in April of 1970. It was not as broad in scope as had been the 1965 instance, but in the course of my investigation, I became convinced it was linked to the unresolved issues that had surfaced four years earlier, most notably
the brutal demands on cadet time, especially for varsity athletes, who were expected to maintain high academic standards despite heavy practice schedules. I made clear in my submission that it was past time to put an end to the unconstrained internal warfare between the three major elements of the Academy that had the cadet wing in turmoil. That was obviously the role of the superintendent, but it would not be undertaken by Lieutenant General Tom Moorman. He retired at the end of the semester and was replaced by Lieutenant General A.P. Clark, whose learning curve ensured that the problem would continue to fester for months. I found this prospect intolerable and was determined to take on the complex, systemic issues eroding the Academy mission, alone if need be. Which it was.

When the academic year ended in May 1970, I was asked to remain in the Commandant’s Shop for the summer and take command of a Basic Cadet squadron for the incoming Class of 1974. This was not just a training unit, but a special holding organization dubbed “K” Squadron, that served as a repository for three categories of basic cadets: those who needed more specialized attention to get through the tough initial months of cadet life, who were injured and unable to participate in training with their peers, or who had been identified for separation and needed to be segregated from routine activities until being mustered out. Each category comprised a distinct flight within “K” Squadron, since each required unique handling. This was a very appealing challenge, and I relished every day of it. The duty also had its distressing moments. Witness the reaction of a Marine colonel when I called to tell him that his son, who had no business in a military school to begin with, had expressed a desire to quit the Academy before the end of Basic Training. He exploded in anger – “You tell him if he drops out not to come home.” “Sir,” I replied, “that’s not a message for me to deliver; I’ll put him on the phone.” I couldn’t help but wonder how many other cadets had come to the Academy to fulfill someone else’s dreams rather than their own. I had come to the Air Force Academy compelled by desperation and driven by penury, which was bad enough. I could only imagine the anguish of not wanting the Academy experience yet being forced through the summer meat grinder.

As the summer of 1970 closed, I left the Commandant’s Shop with a heavy heart and grave concern for the Academy. Morale in the cadet wing was at a low ebb, and relations between the faculty and Commandant’s Shop were highly strained. The recriminations among all three major elements after the honor scandal only heightened the animosity. I decided it was time to act, and I did so on two fronts. The first was to create a Graduate-Cadet Discussion Group through the auspices of the Academy’s Association of Graduates, on
whose board of directors I now sat. The board strongly supported my proposal to create that program, which seconded carefully selected Academy-graduate faculty members as volunteers to work with each cadet squadron. Their responsibility would be to interact with the students, formally, in mandatory Saturday-morning seminars on professional subjects to which the instructors brought their career experiences; and informally, through squadron social events or in their own homes. I sold the idea to the dean and the commandant and it took off. The feedback from the faculty and cadets alike was very positive. I could sense some of the tension starting to ease as classroom instructors began to appreciate the challenges confronting the AOCs, and the cadets began to see their academic mentors in a new light.

Improving communication, however, was only chipping away at the embedded structural problems that I was now convinced were the heart of the systemic tensions at the Academy. As I bade farewell to the Commandant’s Shop, I carved out time from my other duties to research the decisions that had led to the establishment of the Air Force Academy, its mission statement, the academic curriculum, the military training program and the Honor Code. I spent many hours in the magnificent Academy Library, with its sweeping views and well-stocked archives. I wanted to mine from the Academy’s history the roots of the deep divisions among its major components and of the recurring honor scandals that had plagued the institution. The effort began to pay off. By January of 1971, I felt that I had found the core of these problems. I recorded my conclusions and proposed solutions in a paper I dubbed *Operation New Look*. I next undertook a crusade to effect a wholesale revision of the basic structure of a cadet’s four-year experience at the Academy, principally focused on the military training program. Within a year, that campaign would shake the Academy to its foundations.

The end of the summer of 1970 found me back in the Poly Sci Department and teaching the familiar American Government 101 course, giving me the opportunity to experiment with the material and dress up my lesson plans. In the spring semester, I was tapped to teach the advanced course in Political Theory, where I worked with a select group of students who had a keen interest in the subject. The insights I gleaned into the nature of politics, its role in society and its coloration in various systems of government would be invaluable in later years, when I travele the globe dealing with regimes of every stripe.

Another close friendship was a product of serving as Good Samaritans for Pam and Erv Rokke. Shortly after we had joined the Department in the spring of 1970, they had gone back to Harvard for Erv to begin his Ph.D. He had accomplished the prodigious feat of completing his studies, including a
dissertation, in less than a year, and was now returning to the Academy, soon to become a tenured professor. To help smooth their return in the late spring of 1971, we were assigned as their sponsors, which prompts me to relate an anecdote that deepened a relationship which proved invaluable some fifteen years later when we were both general officers.

Erv assured us that he and Pam really didn’t need any assistance, as they had already been assigned quarters and had the moving drill well in hand. We took him at his word and thought little more about it until I got a call from the Academy Transportation Office informing me that the Rokkes’ household goods would be arriving in one hour and the Rokkes were nowhere to be found. En route from Boston by car, they were still two days out. I called Dorene and she immediately agreed that we would accept the shipment to preclude their goods from being unloaded from the moving van, stored, and then loaded back up for the final movement to their quarters. Every cycle of such handling multiplies the chance of damage, a lesson we had learned from a bad experience in our move to Paris.

As it turned out, the damage was already done. We arrived at their quarters just as the moving van drove up. The driver’s first words were, “You may want to think twice before accepting this shipment; when I picked it up at the warehouse in Boston, it was standing in two feet of water.” When he swung open the large doors on the side of the truck, the smell was overpowering. The bottoms of several cardboard cartons were still damp, and only God knew what shape the furniture was in. We decided on the spot to accept the goods. Erv and Pam were out of touch, and we didn’t think it wise to let their things go untended any longer, much less confront them with this mess after a long road trip. The unloading went on well into the night, as we inspected every piece, documented damage, and triaged the entire load, categorizing each item as acceptable, repairable or ruined. The next day we set up their quarters, putting down rugs, stocking the kitchen, arranging the furniture, and hanging or folding clothes. Damaged items went out for repair or to a trash holding area for the Rokkes to confirm the status. The following day, we were waiting at the door when Erv and Pam arrived. We let them absorb the hopefully pleasant shock of seeing their quarters fully arranged, and then took them gently through the horror story. They were surprised, relieved, and grateful. Nothing of great material or intrinsic value had been lost, much was salvaged, and a lifelong friendship was born. Not a bad outcome. Indeed, the day would come when Erv and I would sit across the table from the highest ranking officer in the Soviet military, in his Kremlin office, urging him to take a step that ran counter to the entire history of his embattled nation.
Life was good on every front in the fall of 1970 and into the spring of the following year. We had expanded our little family circle with a Corgi pup acquired from a Colorado Springs pet store, naming him Stormy for the atrocious weather the night we picked him out. He would bring unbounded joy into our lives for seventeen and one-half years. Our social life was enriched not only by the friends we made among the faculty and military training ranks, but also by a great stroke of fortune: we found ourselves in the company of some two dozen of my Academy classmates and their wives, with whom we would spend many happy hours at class parties, all memorable but some best forgotten. Despite the nine years since graduation, we were as closely bonded as that day in June of 1961 when we pinned on our 2nd Lieutenant bars. I would be remiss if I did not grace these pages with the names of the Bainters, Campbells, Cuberos, Danborns, Darnauers, Ellers, Freemans, Graces, Herizas, Hinkles, Hulls, Karnowskis, Kerrs, Mandells, Mays, Negronis, O’Connors, Saunders, Stebbins, Suttons, Tulis’s, Ulms, Wilhelms, and Zompas. This is a remarkably long list for such a small class, and our camaraderie was second only to family life in giving me a sense of contentment that I had long sought but never achieved.

Dorene and I were madly in love and the children were prospering, thanks largely to her constant, comforting presence. We bought Brett his first bicycle, complete with a set of training wheels which speeded his progress in pedaling and manipulating the handlebars but slowed his confidence in going solo. After running myself ragged keeping him upright as he wobbled around the cul-de-sac sans extra wheels, I put just one back on and that worked to perfection. Within days, off it came and he never looked back. He had also reached the stage for his First Communion, preceded by the obligatory study of Catholic basics. Came the day for his interview by the priest, he made two responses for the ages. In reply to the question, “Who were the disciples?” Brett said, “Oh, those were the guys Jesus ran around with,” thereby reducing them to the status of gang members. When asked to define “love,” he looked back at his parents and his sister, turned back to the priest, and replied, “That’s what we have at our house.” We were doing something right. Our beautiful Lisa grew more breathtaking by the day, and Dorene and I continued to deepen our love and mutual respect. There was not a hint of the storm clouds gathering just over the horizon.

Professionally, I had never been more satisfied. As the second semester progressed, my name finally came up in the monthly quotas issued by the Air Force that allowed selectees from the 1969 Majors’ List to pin on their new rank and, blessedly, draw their new pay. That happy occasion was enriched by
the announcement that I had been tapped to run the department’s flagship course, American Government 101, taken by virtually the entire 4th Class. This was a golden opportunity to revamp a syllabus I had found wanting, although that meant taking on the time-consuming task of a complete rewrite, setting learning objectives, selecting the textbook, and drafting supporting materials, lesson plans and examinations. Moreover, I had to sell my ideas for the revised course to the instructors who would be teaching it, many of whom were veterans who would have little appetite for a wholesale revision of material they had spent years assimilating.

Enter yet another complication. While I was serving across the Terrazzo Gap, Lieutenant Colonel Ray Coble had replaced Dick Rosser as the head of the Poly Sci Department. I had already met Ray, a wise and gracious South Carolinian, and admired him immensely. He and I hit it off perfectly from the moment we met, and I knew he had been the deciding factor in my selection to run American Government 101. One morning in mid-May of 1971, just before I had pinned on major’s leaves, Ray had called me into his office and said, a bit abstrusely, “Lee, I’ve just been told we have an opportunity to send a young major to Washington this summer for a two-month sabbatical in the Office of Emergency Planning (OEP). How does that strike you?” As I was not yet a real major, his invitation went right over my head. “Sounds like a great opportunity for someone,” I replied. When Ray realized I was not being coy, he said, “I mean you, Lee, I want you to go and represent the department.” I was flabbergasted but gladly accepted, even though I had never heard of OEP and knew none of the details. The downside was that I would be going back to D.C. alone, eight long weeks away from my family. The intriguing aspect was that OEP was one of several agencies that reported directly to the President of the United States.

Beyond my teaching duties, and family activities, three other responsibilities commanded my remaining time and attention before departing for my summer duty: further refining Operation New Look; drafting the syllabus for American Government 101; and instructing in the cadet Pilot Orientation Program, that had replaced the full-blown Undergraduate Navigator Program early classes had completed, earning them wings at graduation from the Academy. The time and funds for flight training were now deemed better spent preparing senior cadets for the demanding 55-week Air Force Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) program they would enter after the Academy. Some grads had fared poorly in this all-jet training, so some prior experience in a less-demanding aircraft while still a cadet was expected to reduce that washout rate.

For my part, this additional duty allowed me to maintain flying currency as
well as build flight time and experience. The Academy ran the orientation pro-
gram for senior cadets at Peterson Field, on the east side of Colorado Springs,
a half-hour drive from the campus. Peterson was a dual-use airport, with a
civilian terminal on one side of the runways and a military Base Operations on
the other. Colorado Springs played host not only to the Academy, but also to
a large U.S. Army division stationed at Fort Carson south of the city, giving rise
to a considerable volume of supporting air traffic. The Academy operated a
fleet of T-41s, a training version of the Cessna-172, a two-seat, single-engine,
propeller-driven, high-wing plane that was well suited for learning basic piloting
skills.

Instructor pilot duty proved to be far more challenging and time consum-
ing than I had anticipated. The first hurdle was to earn my FAA instructor rating,
normally a long process but one that had been foreshortened for the orienta-
tion program’s instructor pilots (IPs) who were already skilled military pilots.
The FAA flight examiners were, nonetheless, demanding, and a bit miffed by
our special treatment. My examiner really put me through the paces, on the
ground as well as in the air. My early experience teaching flight planning and
as a T-33 IP saved me from total embarrassment, but this guy knew stuff about
maps and manipulating aircraft that put me to shame. I got my rating, but I
was not terribly proud of my performance. That said, I became a decent T-41
pilot and instructor and enhanced my flying skills in the process. Of the five
students I was assigned over three years, one was a French exchange cadet,
a charming young man who helped me brush up my fluency and expand my
aviation vocabulary. The one downside was that I flew only during the last
class period of the day, when the weather normally turned windy or worse.
That made teaching all the more difficult, frequently impossible.

I put on my major’s leaves in May 1971 and left soon thereafter for my sab-
batical in Washington, D.C. OEP turned out to be a sleepy little agency of some
three hundred people headed by retired Army Brigadier General George “Abe”
Lincoln. He was a revered officer who had made his reputation helping save
post-World War II Berlin, then long chaired the Political Science Department at
West Point, where he put his stamp on successive generations of future Army
leaders. I am not clear on why he was appointed to head OEP in the Nixon
White House, but I found him most charming, a gray-haired, courtly gentle-
man with an ever-present pipe, wry smile and a towering intellect. Serving
with me on sabbatical that summer were Lieutenant Colonel Vald Heiberg,
a rising star in the Army Corps of Engineers, and none other than Lieutenant
Colonel Tony Smith, my predecessor at Science Po whose sterling performance
had persuaded M. Henri-Greard to accept my preposterous proposition. I liked
and respected both of them, and we quickly bonded on a personal and professional basis. They walked me through OEP’s functions of managing national disasters, the Strategic Materials Stockpile, and the Emergency Petroleum Reserve. Only the first of these compelled any sense of urgency, and that one not much as far as I could tell. The agency was a typical D.C. holding pattern for paying off political favors, a cushy and not very demanding office whose denizens kept a leisurely pace, with those in the upper echelons knocking down pretty good money.

OEP also had oversight responsibility for the Puerto Rico Oil Import Program, a vestige of an earlier era, designed to boost the economy of this tiny United States protectorate by enticing oil companies to build refineries there whose products would enter the mainland tax-free. As originally envisioned, this offshore operation would represent only a small fraction of each company’s total output, just enough to turn a decent profit while mitigating the island’s high unemployment rate. No one at OEP had looked at the program in quite a while, if ever, so that became my summer project. I spent the first month studying the founding legislation, parsing mountains of data provided by the oil companies in barely intelligible form, and trying to make some sense of it. As I gradually recreated the history of the production levels, the picture that emerged was shocking. The oil companies had taken this ancillary program and turned it into a massive loophole through which they were shipping millions of gallons of duty-free gasoline into the U.S. It looked and smelled like a modern-day Tea Pot Dome scandal.

When I was dead sure of my facts, I put together a briefing and took it to Tony and Vald. They instantly grasped the big picture and its portent for OEP and the administration. The next stop was General Lincoln, whose reaction was similarly swift. This, he said, needs to be vetted at cabinet level, whereupon he picked up the phone and called the Secretaries of the Treasury and Commerce, who had collateral responsibility for the oil import program. So in the middle of a hot August afternoon a few days later, I found myself briefing these two heavyweights, along with a coterie of staffers, in a cramped OEP conference room. They proved a hostile audience and attacked the messenger relentlessly. I held my ground, stuck to the facts, and plowed my way through a presentation they clearly did not want to hear. This was trouble they didn’t need, but trouble they got. This was one fight I was happy to be able to walk away from, because on Friday of that week, August 13th, I was on a plane back to the Academy.

After a happy reunion with the family, I focused my attention on getting to the printer the voluminous amount of American Government 101 course
material I had laboriously churned out in Washington, so I could begin train-
ing my cadre of instructors. On Saturday night, the major news outlets carried
an announcement that the President of the United States would address the
nation on Sunday evening, the 15th of August, subject unknown. At the ap-
pointed hour, Dorene and I, along with much of the rest of the country, were
 glued to the television. After a long preamble in which he laid out the severe
penalties of inflation, which had reached the intolerable level of six percent (!),
President Nixon announced the first peacetime wage and price freeze in the
nation’s history, a bolt-out-of-the-blue, preemptive strike that hit like an eco-
nomic atom bomb. His next statement struck me like an aftershock: this mam-
moth Economic Stabilization Program would be administered by the Office of
Economic Preparedness. I later learned that just prior to going on the air, the
President had called General Lincoln to inform him. The sleepy little agency I’d
just finished working for had just gotten a shattering wakeup call – I could hear
it ringing all the way to Colorado.

My summons came Monday morning. By an incredible stroke of fate, the
Academy’s new superintendent, Lieutenant General Clark, was General
Lincoln’s brother-in-law. So, when General Abe called to request my services
back at OEP to help manage the wage and price freeze, I never had an op-
tion. General Clark called the dean, who passed what by now was an order to
Colonel Ray Coble. I was stunned by this turn of events, faced with the propo-
sition of leaving my family once again, and of turning over my course director
duties to someone who could not possibly share my vision, passion and grasp
of the complex course materials that I had assembled. I was allowed a brief pe-
riod to pass the baton and then was off to Washington, where this time I took
a monthly lease on a hotel room around the corner from OEP. I called Tony
Smith and arranged to see him early Monday morning, to get up to speed and
step into my new role. Nothing could have prepared me for what was to come.

I walked into a madhouse. Every phone was ringing off the hook, the halls
were filled with people, including very important visitors, who were stacked
up like patients in an overflowing emergency room. Vald and Tony were put-
ing the finishing touches on an organization plan to bring some semblance of
order to the managerial chaos, but the bigger challenge was the lack of policy
to guide implementation of the freeze. By choosing to make the initiative a
surprise, the President had kept businesses from jacking up prices before the
start date of the freeze, and unions from pressing for wage increases. He had
also put OEP between a rock and a very hard place: freeze wages and prices
in a trillion-dollar American economy with not one shred of policy in place to
implement that freeze. Tony said that on the preceding Monday, August 16th,
they had been besieged by corporate CEOs, high-priced lawyers, union presidents, lobbyists, landlords, professional associations, and even the butcher shop owner around the corner with thousands of unanswerable questions and complicated issues that the best minds in government would need to tackle. The threat of lawsuits from every side mounted by the minute. Welcome to the nightmare world of a partial “command economy.”

The most urgent task, getting policy regarding the freeze into the public record, became the province of a newly formed Policy Committee, comprising several cabinet undersecretaries, high-powered government lawyers, a White House counselor and other senior officials, all directed by Dr. Arnold Weber, brought in from the University of Chicago School of Economics. I was assigned the job of secretary to the Policy Committee, responsible for culling from the hundreds of questions that poured daily into OEP those that were the most urgent and representative of broad classes of issues, building an agenda, taking notes during committee deliberations, recording decisions reached, formalizing these decisions into policy statements, and forwarding these policies for printing and public dissemination. These were very demanding tasks, of mindboggling complexity and huge import. Deciding which questions to address, framing them coherently, synthesizing the debate among the principals and accurately capturing their decisions – these were demanding, time-consuming, stressful challenges. As in most meetings, the discussions in the Policy Committee wandered off point, were sprinkled with technical jargon, and frequently ended with pronouncements meant to convey closure without actually constituting clear-cut decisions.

The daily meetings were held in the Old Executive Office Building, directly across 17th Street from the Winder Building, which housed OEP. The Old EOB was on the White House grounds, which meant clearing security both coming and going. The committee convened at 10:00 a.m. and worked at least two hours, often more, after which I would return to my desk at the OEP and spend the afternoon creating the record, crafting the decision language and getting it to the printing office. Sometime around 6:00 p.m., I turned my attention to the meeting agenda for the following day and sifted until 9:00 p.m. or so through the phone and message traffic that had accumulated. Then I took a break for food at a nearby restaurant. I then returned to the office for another two or three hours spent building the next morning’s agenda. Shortly after midnight, I went back to my hotel room, crashed for four hours, and then was back in the office by 5:00 a.m. to check the message traffic, proofread the published record from the previous day, amend the agenda for the day’s meeting as necessary, and be ready to brief Director Weber by 8:00 a.m. That left just enough
time to get over to Old EOB and set up the room before the committee began straggling in, usually at a few minutes before 10:00.

This daily grind went on without pause for two months, stretching my physical, intellectual, and emotional resources to their limits. I was completely on my own, as Vald and Tony were absorbed by the management challenge of building a nation-wide communications and compliance network to ensure that the various elements of the freeze policy were getting to the field and being properly implemented. It was a unique experience, a vital role in a drama that touched every facet of the world’s largest economy. The issues ran the gamut from extremely complex contracts, such as those covering long-term sales of commercial aircraft and commodities futures and the treatment of stock options and other deferred compensation, to more simple, but still profoundly consequential questions, such as the effect of the freeze on insurance rates and even on organizational dues. As an example, General Lincoln called me into his office one evening where stood before his desk in uniformed splendor, the leader of the Girl Scouts of America. “This nice lady” said Abe, “has a problem and wouldn’t you be so good as to escort her into the conference room and find a solution?”

It seems the Girl Scouts had recently signed a group life-insurance contract to cover their young ladies in the event of untimely death while engaged in scouting activities. The premium was to be covered by a small increase in the dues for all the Girl Scouts, which was to have taken effect on August 16th, coinciding precisely with the implementation of the freeze. Thus, the Girl Scouts were stuck with a premium they could not afford and which threatened to drain their cash reserves. I made an on-the-spot decision that this issue fell in the small-potatoes category, appointed myself temporary chairman of the Policy Committee, and told the grand dame she was authorized to implement a phased dues increase over the next three months, but not to say a word about our quiet arrangement. Greatly relieved, she later wrote a personal letter of thanks to General Lincoln, who sent it on to me with an equally nice note attached. I noted some years later when a history of the freeze was written, she had been true to her word, as the official record noted that the Girl Scouts had been greatly distressed, along with a multitude of other organizations.

Not all of the matters we addressed were so neatly resolved. To the contrary, the draconian freeze subjected the economy to severe stress and had consequences no one had intended or could have foreseen. Many small businesses were driven under, city finances were squeezed mercilessly, wage earners lost hard-won salary increases, and landlords faced rent controls that precluded maintaining their properties. The impacts were wide ranging and
mounting daily. Clearly, something had to be done, and quickly, before the political costs became intolerable to the Administration.

The answer was to declare Phase One of the freeze a success and put the wheels in motion for Phase Two, which would focus on those sectors having the most dominant effect on inflation, and help get key business and labor leaders engaged in the policy process. This led to one of the most traumatic episodes I have ever lived through, before or since, threatening my health, my flying status and my career.

My entry into that lion’s den began with a Wednesday afternoon call in mid-November from General Lincoln, who informed me that he had just agreed to loan me to the White House for a few days; I should go directly over to the OEB and see Peter Flanigan, who would give me my instructions. I had never heard of the man. When I arrived outside his door, the sign announced him as Counselor to the President. His secretary ushered me into his chambers, where, without bothering to look up, he said, “The President will have his first meeting with the Pay Board and Price Commission this Friday in the White House. Set it up.” I had no idea what he was talking about, so I asked what I thought was a reasonable question: “Who, sir, are the members of the Pay Board and the Price Commission?” Now he looked up and replied angrily, “Ask my secretary. Now get out of here.” This, I thought, is not going to be fun.

When I put the question to his secretary, she fumbled through some papers on her desk, came up with two scraps from a yellow legal pad and handed them to me. On one, Flanigan had scribbled in pencil the heading, “Price Commission,” along with seven names, with the first, Marina Whitman, identified as chairman. The other scrap, entitled, “Pay Board,” had twenty names, with a twenty-first line annotated with a question mark, followed by the word, “chairman.” I took the papers back to my office in OEP, where a reinforcement waited, by the name of Bob, last name lost, a bright civilian intern who immediately understood the drill ahead. We studied Flanigan’s list and realized we didn’t know very many of the names: one or two on the Price Commission, and a handful on the Pay Board, most notably labor leader George Meany.

How in the world were we going to get in touch with these people to tell them about the Friday meeting? Equally important, where in the White House should the meeting be held, for how long, and what would be the agenda? Should there be a lunch afterward? If so, what would be the menu? What about the press? And, oh by the way, who would select the Pay Board chairman and make sure he or she got to Washington by Friday morning? The only thing I knew for sure was, come hell or high water, I was not going to ask Peter Flanigan any more questions. I would just have to figure it out for myself.
I decided first that the meeting would start at 10:00 a.m. on Friday, which seemed a decent hour, and that it would be held in the Cabinet Room of the White House, which I knew would hold the expected attendees. I would leave the lunch details until Thursday; I had eaten in the White House dining room with General Lincoln and, based on prior experience, I figured I could find the civilian equivalent of a mess sergeant to help me out. As I turned my attention to the challenge of contacting the people on the two lists, I had a brainstorm: why not rely on the White House operators?

On a hunch, I picked up my phone, dialed “O” and sure enough, the White House switchboard answered. I explained who I was and the task I had been given. To my relief, a highly professional voice said, “Major Butler, give me your names, and we will find these people. I will get back to you as we reach them.” I first gave her the members of the Price Commission and asked if she could refer those calls to Bob on his line; I would handle the Pay Board. Then, I wrote out a little spiel by way of opening the conversation with people I didn’t know and who surely didn’t know Bob or me. “Good evening, this is Mr. (Major might confuse them) Butler calling from the White House. The President is pleased to inform you that the first meeting of the (Price Commission/Pay Board) will be held this Friday at ten o’clock in the Cabinet Room of the White House. The meeting will begin with a press conference to introduce the members, followed by the President’s guidance. After lunch in the White House dining room, the (Commission/Board) Chairman will meet with the other members to organize the work program. How may I assist you?”

My first call was connected at about 6:00 Wednesday evening. The White House operator said, “Mr. Butler, I have (the CEO of a major oil company) on the line.” I launched into my spiel, but his answer to my offer of assistance left me momentarily speechless: “That’s all just fine, Mr. Butler, but what is a Pay Board and what does it have to do with me?” My God, I thought, the people on those scraps of paper had not even been asked if they would serve, much less in what capacity. Whoa, Nellie. This was a horse of an entirely different color. Who was I to inform them of their selection and why would they listen to me, much less believe me? But, at this juncture, those were moot questions. I gracefully backpedaled, offering assurances that the President had wanted to make the request personally, but time being so short, he had no choice but to delegate it to his most trusted staff. This was pure baloney, but it worked. As it turned out, the CEO was at an airport about to board for a trip to North Africa, but he said he would cancel his plans and be in Washington for the Friday meeting. “And, no, thanks for the offer, but my secretary will arrange the logistics; please tell the President I am honored to be selected.”
I put a check by his name and immediately called Bob to tell him we needed to amend our opening spiel to say, “The President is pleased to invite you to serve on the ....” Bob was equally incredulous, but agreed that we had no choice but to continue with this quest. We had only forty hours until show time and the clock was ticking. By 9:00 p.m., we were on a roll. All of the members of the Price Commission were falling in line, and I had worked my way through about half the Pay Board. This was too good to be true. Indeed. My next call was to George Meany, the irascible and profane leader of the AFL-CIO, who let me get through my spiel and then erupted. “Butler, you tell Nixon that George Meany ain’t coming to no meeting, no time, no place until he gets that legislative shit on the Hill cleaned up,” and with that, he slammed down the phone. Red Alert. I knew this was big trouble but decided it would have to wait until morning. I had ten more people to call that night and a mountain of work the next day. I asked the operator to ring me the minute Peter Flanigan arrived at his office on Thursday, then spent the rest of the night getting to the bottom of my list and addressing a legion of administrative matters.

I was still at my desk when Flanigan called just before 8:00 a.m. the next day. I gave him Meany’s reply, word for word, and then listened to him erupt. “Why the hell are you talking to George Meany? In this Administration only the Secretary of Labor talks to George Meany, and you are sure as hell not the Secretary of Labor. After I hang up, you wait five minutes and then you call the Secretary of Labor and tell him exactly what you told me. And don’t you say another word to George Meany.” The Secretary of Labor was not at all exercised at this turn of events. He thanked me for the call and told me he would take the matter from here, which I was more than happy for him to do.

Bob and I spent the next day putting myriad details in place, working with White House security, communications, the dining room staff, and the Press Secretary, everyone we could think of who might have an interest in the meeting. At 3:00 p.m., I returned to my office and typed up a minute-by-minute agenda for the meeting, noting who was responsible for every action, Bob or me, and the appropriate White House staffer. By 6:00, I was outside Flanigan’s office waiting to brief him on the plan. He listened without a word, took a copy when I had finished, and then said, “I’ve got it. You’re fired. Get out.” Two Red Alerts in twelve hours. My emotional knees started to buckle.

I made my way down the stairs and out of the Old EOB in a state of shock. After thirty-eight hours with no sleep and very little to eat or drink, I was already running on adrenaline. Focusing on the Washington Monument at the foot of 17th Street, I walked the several blocks down to Constitution Avenue and back trying to clear my head. Whoever Flanigan had in mind to replace
me could not possibly get up to speed in time to pull off Friday’s meeting. Although the plan was fairly well thought out, much of it was still in my head, and there remained a host of loose ends that would require most of the remaining time to tie up. I decided to simply ignore Flanigan’s peremptory dismissal, at least for the next several hours, and to continue down my action list, the next task being to distribute copies of the plan to the key offices and players who had a need to know. Working down my list, by 9:00 that evening I came to the name Donald Rumsfeld, Counselor and Economic Assistant to the President. I found his office, saw the light was on and knocked on the door. “Come in, come in,” boomed a commanding voice, and I walked into the presence of a force of nature.

Rumsfeld was all smiles, bounced out of his chair to shake my hand, offered me a soft drink from his small refrigerator and said, “Tell me what brings you here at this ungodly hour.” He was a compact man, barely 39 years of age, powerfully built and brimming with confidence. I felt quite at ease and walked him through the plan. He was obviously a quick study, and when I had finished, he cut to the chase. “Where will you be when the President is ready to come into the Cabinet Room?” I hesitated, then replied that as far as I knew my role would end after our conversation. Startled, he asked why on earth that was the case, and I related the whole Meany episode that had culminated in my being fired by Peter Flanigan. Rumsfeld gave a dismissive wave of his hand and said, “Peter’s a good man, but he has his moments. You see this thing through as planned and I’ll cover you with Flanigan.”

I finished my rounds and a bit before midnight returned to my office, where I sat and took deep breaths until my heart stopped pounding. Then I walked one more time through the events of the following day, scheduled to culminate at 4:00 p.m. Satisfied that all the bases were covered, I returned to my hotel room, took a long, hot shower, slowly dressed and, figuring that sleep was hopeless, returned to the office where I waited until Vald and Tony arrived and then brought them up to date. From there, I went to the White House and started through my Friday action list, leaving only one task open: I still had no idea who would be the chairman of the Pay Board and who was responsible for getting him to the meeting. I later learned that filling the position was a classic example of the Byzantine machinations of the Nixon White House. Flanigan had been wooing his preferred choice without success, right up to the last moment. As a fallback, he had offered the position to a hapless former federal judge by the name of Bolt, who lived in the state of Washington. Flanigan had flown him to D.C. and had him waiting in the wings, not knowing until the day of the meeting whether or not he would be tapped to play the chairman role.
Since Judge Bolt had no experience in the corridors of national power, Flanigan might as well have put him on a skewer, saving Meany the effort. The day went according to schedule, the only exception being well beyond my control: George Meany didn’t show. However, other heavyweights from the labor unions did, softening that blow somewhat. The opening press conference held no surprises, since there had been no media leaks. Judge Bolt looked like the proverbial deer in the headlights, and I could see the labor representatives licking their chops. The President said all the right words, hosted a pleasant lunch for both groups, and the two groups repaired to their respective rooms to get organized. The Price Commission jelled quickly, Dr. Whitman being a skilled manager and highly respected economist. The Pay Board was a far different matter: the labor and business members were at each other’s throats from the get-go. That, however, was someone else’s problem. Mine seemingly ended when the last car left the White House grounds at 4:00 p.m. I walked slowly back to OEP, sat down at my desk and suddenly doubled over in blinding pain. I felt as if a red-hot poker had been shoved through my left kidney.

I gradually recovered my breath, stood up shakily, and headed for my hotel room, hoping that a decent night’s sleep would stem whatever malady had overtaken me. No way. No sooner did I walk in the door of my hotel room than a second attack of excruciating pain took me to my knees. I reached for the phone and dialed Tony Smith; when he answered, I gasped that I was at the hotel and in serious trouble. That was my last coherent thought until I woke up hours later in Bethesda Naval Hospital. Since it was the weekend, my ward was dark and deserted, and I had no idea where I was or what my condition might be. Spying my chart at the foot of the bed, I read the name of the hospital, and learned that I had suffered a kidney stone, had been saturated with fluids, and had passed the stone. I was scheduled to remain at Bethesda for observation until Monday morning. No way. A kidney stone meant immediate grounding, the possible end of my flying career. My career, period. Not thinking about the hour, I called Tony Smith and pleaded with him to come get me from the hospital, immediately; I would explain later. With considerable reservation, Tony came to my rescue. I found my clothes in a nearby locker, changed from my hospital gown, stripped my bed, took my chart and left without a word, hoping my absence would not be missed come Monday morning, by which time I intended to be back at in my office.

I stayed with Tony and family over the remainder of the weekend, ate a decent meal for the first time in days and got the story of what had transpired after my phone call from the hotel. Tony and Vald had rushed to my room,
found me on the floor and called General Lincoln, who had, in turn, called the White House physician, Dr. Tkasch, who dispatched the White House ambulance to take me to Bethesda. En route, I had reportedly shredded the linens and curtains until the attending orderly got some pain killer into my veins. On arrival at Bethesda, I had been met by everyone of importance from the Chief of Medicine on down – they were obviously expecting the President of the United States. Despite their disappointment when I instead was wheeled out, I got first-rate care, although I imagine that to this day those who tended me wonder who I really was and where in the world I had gone.

By the end of November, the Phase Two wage and price controls were in place, other government agencies had been enlisted in the task of implementation, a plethora of lawsuits were underway, and my primary role now was to create a speech and associated viewgraphs for General Lincoln, then to accompany him for a series of “How we did it” presentations to various and sundry audiences. A week into December, I felt compelled to broach with him my desire to return to the Academy, my family and the Political Science Department. He said he understood but that I needed to consider another offer that had just come in the form of a phone call from the White House: was I interested in taking on a senior post in the new Phase Two implementation bureaucracy, one that carried a civil service rank equivalent to a one-star general? I was speechless; not only was such an offer wholly unanticipated, but it was the furthest thing from my mind. I replied that I had been honored to serve in OEP but I was unalterably committed to my military career. He smiled and said, “I thought that would be your answer. You are free to return to the Academy.”

To which I returned with health poor, and morale worse. Dorene had done another outstanding job during a lonely and stressful interruption of what should have been a far more tranquil period in our lives. I had missed another birthday, as well as Thanksgiving, and the start of Brett’s third-grade year, when he had begun to experience the emotional burdens of being younger and smaller than all of his peers. Dorene had called me at OEP late one evening to relate that Brett had come home in tears. All of the children had been weighed and measured that day, and he was the smallest in his class. I asked her to put him on the phone. “Brett,” I said, “guess what? Everyone in my office was weighed and measured today and I am the shortest and lightest person in this whole place. But, you know what? No one seems to care. They think I’m pretty smart and friendly and we all get along just fine.” All of that was true, except for the weighing and measuring, and Brett seemed to appreciate that he was a chip off a pretty small block named Dad. My heart was heavy for him, but by this point
in my life I knew that being smart and semi-friendly had gone a long way for me, and he was a lot smarter and friendlier than I would ever be.

My morale was not helped by the fact that my efforts to cover up the kidney stone episode had gone for naught. General Lincoln had called his brother-in-law to chat, and in the course of the conversation, had asked about my health. Startled, General Clark immediately called the Academy hospital, which of course had no record of any medical problem on my part. Game over. The flight surgeon’s office called me, and I was immediately grounded. I remained off flying status until a high-level review of my case was completed several weeks later. I was then allowed to return to flying with the proviso that another stone at any point in the future would result in permanent grounding. I understood the logic of the decision but did not relish the thought of being at the mercy of my kidneys for the rest of my career.

I came down with the flu the same day General Clark’s office called summoning me on an hour’s notice to an award ceremony in his office. I staggered out of bed, showered, dressed, shaved in the car while Dorene drove, and we walked in just as my name was called to receive a Letter of Commendation from the President for my work on the wage and price freeze. It was a nice way to meet my new boss, but an otherwise miserable day.

Beyond my health, the stint in Washington left an indelible impression. I became profoundly doubtful of any government’s ability to centrally manage a national economy without massively perturbing the unfathomably complex interplay among wages, prices and rents that, in accord with Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” produces an efficient marketplace. I had also seen government bureaucrats at their best and at their worst: slackers drawing a paycheck but dodging responsibility and accountability; bright, dedicated civil servants who earned their trust every day through honest competent service; and some of the amoral political animals who populated the Nixon White House, tainting everything they touched with the stench of self-serving power-mongering. Lord Acton’s indictment was in the main accurate: with power comes the temptation of situational ethics, justifying means in the name of ends formulated in private and pursued in secrecy. I was determined that, should the opportunity ever arise, I would never allow high office to affect the values that had become so fundamental to my own sense of self: integrity in all things, great and small, treating people with decency and respect, and humility in service to the public trust.

I had also come to a critical career decision. The Air Force had added a new stipulation to the rules governing how advanced pilot ratings were to be achieved – ratings that were key to future command opportunities. Rather than
simply months of service, a minimum standard for accumulated flying hours had been added, putting me well behind where I should have been nine and a half years after earning my basic pilot wings. I was also personally feeling too long and too far removed from the operational Air Force, particularly as I had not established an identity with one of the major flying commands. I was now a field-grade officer, which meant that I would be expected to fill the more responsible supervisory positions in a flying unit, but for which I could readily be seen as lacking the requisite experience. In short, I felt the need to curtail my Academy tour from the prescribed four years to three. I would bide my time for a month or two, I decided, and then broach the request with the department head, Lieutenant Colonel Ray Coble, who was by then a mentor and friend.

In the meantime, my new teaching duties commanded much of my time and energies. I had been elevated to assistant professor and assigned to teach Defense Policy 412, a senior-level course in national security planning that I found quite fascinating and that would prove invaluable when I returned to Washington as a staff officer in the Pentagon. The director of the course had done a superb job putting it together; I enjoyed working with him and was passionate about both the course material and teaching it. This was my first opportunity to build a solid foundation of expertise in the organizational structure and processes of the Department of Defense, nuclear deterrence theory, arms control policy, and weapon systems planning, development and acquisition, as well as a deeper understanding of other military services' cultures and the pernicious effects of interservice rivalry such as I had witnessed in Vietnam.

The professional satisfaction of being back in the classroom was offset by my dismay at the still unsettled state of cadet morale and discipline. By now, I had developed strong relationships with a number of AOCs, including my closest friend, Bobbie Grace, and many senior cadets, whose judgment I trusted. What they had to say about life in the trenches at the Academy was chilling, especially the lack of respect for the Honor Code. I decided the time had come to put the finishing touches on Operation New Look and take it up the chain of command as far as I could push it.

The central premise of my proposal was that four years of the current version of cadet life was too long, giving rise to a 3rd Class (sophomore) year devoid of meaningful responsibility, and, by the 1st Class year, generating a widespread cynicism born of living needlessly under onerous rules and restrictions that promoted adolescent behavior rather than preparing cadets in their final year for the transition to the real Air Force. This destructive cynicism was transmitted downward to the underclassmen, weakening the cadet chain of command and eroding the very foundations of the Academy itself. A case in
point was the consequences of the policy of mandatory chapel attendance, requiring that every cadet attend a Sunday religious service. I had long been opposed to this policy, both on constitutional grounds and because of its blatant hypocrisy. Many cadets had no interest in organized religion and therefore resented being portrayed as devout and forced to listen to sermons they found boring or contrary to their beliefs. One of the insights I gleaned from private conversations with cadets was their widespread resort to a “touch the chapel” end-run of the Honor Code, the practice of recording “chapel” in the destination column of the squadron sign-out log, then going to the front door of the chapel, touching its handle, and then going on to some other destination, which, according to regulations, was not authorized until the end of chapel services. In my day as a cadet, this sort of blatant quibbling, involving a deliberate intent to deceive, would most certainly have resulted in an Honor violation and immediate dismissal from the Academy.

The essence of my central recommendation in Operation New Look was to shorten the “cadet” experience to three years, moving the leadership responsibilities currently assigned to the 2nd and 1st Classmen down into the 3rd and 2nd Class years, respectively. I would then redesignate 1st Classmen as “3rd Lieutenants,” move them to a separate, “segregated” living area, where they would be treated as commissioned officers in every appropriate respect. That would include making them subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, as well as assigning them additional duties with various Academy organizations to begin to give them a taste of what their professional life would be like in their initial Air Force assignments as second lieutenants.

This core proposal of my paper was preceded by a lengthy assessment of every training program consistent with my proposed reformulation of the Academy mission statement. That statement required the Academy, “To provide instruction, experience and motivation to each cadet so that he graduates with the knowledge and qualities of leadership essential to his progressive development as a career officer in the United States Air Force.” After long reflection, I concluded that “motivation” was not part and parcel with “instruction and experience,” that is, a tangible activity that could be provided. Rather, motivation was a function of the quality of instruction and the experiences comprising the Academy program. Thus, with statistics indicating that a significant fraction of Air Force Academy graduates were eschewing an Air Force career, leaving the Air Force after their relatively brief mandatory service of four or five years, it was time to put the quality of the full range of Academy programs under a microscope. The key to such a reassessment lay in reformulating two critical “givens” in the mission statement as critical “objectives,” in order to provide a laser-like
focus on the sole justification for the Academy’s existence. To achieve that clarity, I proposed the following reformulation of the Academy mission statement: “To provide instruction and experience to each cadet, so that he graduates with the knowledge and qualities essential to leadership, and the motivation to become a career officer in the United States Air Force.” Teach the knowledge and qualities needed for leadership and inspire career motivation. That’s what the Air Force Academy was in business to do, but, unlike West Point and Annapolis, had never clearly understood how to accomplish it.

Ray Coble cleared me to see the dean, General Woodyard, who was very receptive and urged me to take Operation New Look forward to the superintendent. That meant my next stop was with the Commandant of Cadets. Knowing General Olds only by observation and cadet comments and believing that I would benefit by having a member of his military training organization as a wingman during my presentation, I asked Bobbie Grace to accompany me which, to his credit, he did. Big mistake; I put Bobbie at grave risk. General Olds listened to my pitch in silence; then, like a jet engine winding up, he began to voice his disagreement, first in a quiet but strained voice from behind his desk, then more loudly on his feet behind the desk, finally, at full throttle a few inches from my face. At one point, I thought he might throw me bodily from his fifth-floor window, known as he was for manhandling recalcitrant cadets. When he finished, I thanked him for his time and advised him that my next stop was the superintendent’s office. Sensing that he was reaching for something to throw, I beat a hasty retreat, with Bobbie right behind me.

General Clark was quick to accept my request for an audience, and we had a very congenial discussion. I dispensed with the briefing charts, choosing instead to discuss my proposal over coffee and leave a copy of the paper with him. A few weeks later, a third Honor Code scandal hit the Academy like a tidal wave and I suddenly looked like a prophet. General Clark personally called me at home. Dorene answered and relayed his request for me to come to his office, where we walked back through the New Look assessment and proposals in detail. When we were done, he said, “Lee, I want you to give your briefing again, here in my office, but this time I will have the commandant receive it with me.” I gently raised an eyebrow, and General Clark said, “Don’t worry about General Olds; he is my responsibility.”

When we met a few days later, the tension in the room was palpable. General Olds was seething but managed to restrain himself, letting his subordinate, Major Ed Montgomery, Class of ‘59, undertake the rebuttal from a carefully rehearsed script. When Ed was done, General Clark went right to the central element of my proposal. “Let’s get out of the weeds and talk about
Major Butler’s assessment of the underlying problems in our Academy program; we can debate the particulars of how to address them later.”

That of course was precisely where General Olds did not want to go, because most of my indictment was aimed squarely at the Commandant’s Shop and the military training program and – unsaid but obvious – its leadership. After letting him squirm on the hook for a few agonizing minutes, General Clark tasked the commandant to come back with his own fully developed evaluation of the Academy’s problems and a plan for addressing them, which he said he would look at side-by-side with *Operation New Look*. In the meantime, he directed that the Academy mission statement be immediately revised according to my formulation, a rather clear signal of where his sympathies lay. At this point, I knew General Olds’ days were numbered.

At this critical juncture, fate intervened once more. The Air Force Chief of Staff had called for a meeting of his four-stars at the Academy, a group that now included General Brown, who had returned from Vietnam to head the Air Force Systems Command, which oversaw the development and acquisition of new Air Force weapons systems. I had not heard from him since the spring of 1970, when he wrote me a brief note. Now, a year later, as a prelude to his visit to the Academy, he wrote again, asking for my views on what had gone wrong at the Air Force Academy, and why. I sent him a lengthy, detailed response, sparing nothing and no one, and included recommendations about the rank and desired qualities of the Academy superintendent, the dean and the commandant – the latter job, I suggested, perhaps being best suited to a sixty-year-old grandmother with a Ph.D. in Child Psychology. Obviously tongue-in-cheek, but General Brown got the point.

My assignment during the Commanders’ Conference was to host General Brown, who arrived at Peterson Field with the Air Force Chief of Staff and a host of other senior leaders from the Washington area. He never mentioned what came of that four-star conclave and whatever discussion of the Academy’s travails it might have included, but he did ask me about my plans after teaching there. I told him I intended to ask for a one-year curtailment of my tour, and that I wanted to go to the Military Airlift Command (MAC). “Why MAC?” he asked. Knowing he had airlift experience earlier in his career, I said, “Two reasons. Most important, I want to learn the mission. Second, I am well behind the flying time curve and will be able to build flying hours quickly in MAC.” “Sounds reasonable,” he said. “Let me know when you have cleared things with your boss.”

With that direction, I made an appointment to see Ray Coble the next day. His greeting when we met caught me completely by surprise. “Lee, come in,” he said, “I have some good news for you.” I was nonplussed; what could this
news be? “The dean just called to say he has approved the department’s rec-
ommendation to make you a tenured professor in our department. We need
to talk about where you want to go to study for your Ph.D.” My God, I had
been biding my time before coming to ask to leave a year early, and Ray had
been working behind the scenes to put me on track for a future senior tenured
position on the faculty. “Sir,” I began, “I can’t tell you how honored I am by this
offer, but, truth be told, my heart is with the operational Air Force. I feel that
is where I am best suited to make my Air Force career, and, in fact, I asked for
this time on your schedule today to seek your permission to curtail my tour in
order to leave the Academy this summer and get back to flying.”

Ray could not have been more understanding; he understood my motiva-
tion and replied that, viewed from my perspective, it was the right decision.
I should at least have talked to Dorene about the offer of tenure, but I knew
she would be more than happy to get back to an operational environment.
The Academy tour had proved a very mixed blessing for her and the children.
Brett’s school was excellent, there were myriad activities and distractions, we
had a great social life with friends and classmates, and Stormy had proven
to be the perfect pet. Conversely, I worked very long hours, had spent many
months away in Washington, embroiled myself in controversy that inevitably
spilled over into family life, and left raising Brett and Lisa largely to Dorene.
The most quality time I had with Brett was during a Cub Scout-related six-mile
hike we took in May of 1972, along a trail bounding the western perimeter of
the Academy. I was amazed at his stamina and how he chattered the entire
time. I began to appreciate more fully what I was missing in our children’s up-
bringing and how well Dorene was building their character.

My new assignment arrived just as the school year was ending: thanks
to my mentor, I was to join the 63rd Military Airlift Wing at Norton AFB in San
Bernardino, California, where I would fly the C-141 Starlifter, after a two-month
check-out program at Altus AFB, Oklahoma. We relished our two farewell par-
ties, one with the Poly Sci crowd and another with ‘61 classmates, and rejoiced
that our new duty post was only an hour’s drive from the Nunley family home
in Hemet. This was the best of all possible outcomes, putting a nice touch on
the end of our three years in Colorado. I left the Academy a more seasoned
officer and a more sober person, having been tested in the classroom, in the
hearts and minds of the extraordinary cadets I’d encountered, and in the fires
of the Washington political scene. I felt well prepared for the next challenge.
Wrong. Very wrong. I had not a clue about life in a Military Airlift Command
flying squadron. It would be the alien, undisciplined world of Cam Ranh Bay Air
Base, South Vietnam, all over again.
San Bernardino was a very fortuitous location for my new assignment and did not come by chance. After General Brown worked his magic, the officer assignments folks at the Air Force Personnel Center called to ask if I had a base preference within MAC, and Norton AFB, one hour from Hemet and Veda’s home cooking, fit the bill perfectly. In fact, Hemet would be our interim home while we awaited base housing. By a stroke of fortune, several dozen new pre-fabricated duplexes were in the final stages of completion on the base, with an early September availability, and we were at the top of the waiting list. Dorene and the children would once again join her parents for an extended stay during the summer while I completed C-141 training in Oklahoma. If things worked out, she would make the move to the base just prior to the start of the school year. A San Bernardino public elementary school was located very near the base, where Brett would start fourth grade and Lisa, kindergarten.

We put our household goods in a moving van, said farewell to Douglas Valley, loaded the Camaro, and headed for Hemet. I had only a few days there before departing for Altus AFB, a drab, down-at-the-heels base located just outside the limits of the even shabbier town for which it was named. This was rural Oklahoma: hot, dusty, ramshackle living in a one-horse, one-Arby’s town. My life was bounded by my dorm room, classrooms, mess hall food, and a bad mattress. I was not much impressed with my new major command, but the C-141A had my full attention. It was a big, complex airplane with five crew members or more, depending on the mission. This was a new world for me, and I had to master it in a hurry. My first simulator ride was discouraging, as I had considerable difficulty accommodating to the primary instruments, which displayed speed, altitude and other flight data using a set of vertical, parallel tapes, each moving up and down in conjunction with any change in the value of the parameter being measured. I had grown up in the flying world with round dials and needles on every other airplane I had flown. After two successive poor simulator rides, I talked the scheduler into letting me sit in the
jump seat to observe a training flight with an instructor and student from the class ahead of mine. I stared at the tapes for four hours, to include multiple touch-and-go landings. By the end of the day, I finally understood the rationale for the vertical tapes and how to read them and finished the program without incident.

On the home front in California, our only concern was the quality of the public schools, as San Bernardino is a city of very modest means with a large immigrant population. However, the little one-story elementary school was quite adequate, and Brett and Lisa had superb teachers. The kindergarten teacher, Ms. Anconda, was a joy; she quickly put our minds at ease. The ethnic diversity was fortuitous, affording the opportunity to reinforce our constant emphasis on tolerance and open-mindedness.

For Dorene and me, the transition to MAC was not nearly so smooth. Life in an airlift unit was completely foreign to the close-knit relationships we had enjoyed at Craig Air Force Base and at the Academy. For the families of aircrew members, the airlift mission entails long periods of separation, particularly for a west-coast wing like Norton, whose mission covered the vast Pacific region, including the combat theater in Southeast Asia, as well as Japan and Australia. The typical overseas mission ran ten days or more, and two trips a month was not unusual. The aircrew culture also militated against socializing. Pilots, co-pilots, navigators, all officer specialties, tended to party together by rating, as did the enlisted flight engineers and loadmasters. This preference was largely driven by the fact that MAC did not form permanent crew units comprising a member from each specialty; rather, the command employed “standardized” crews, whereby the complement for each mission was assembled from pools of available position specialists, as managed by their schedulers. That crew came together for the first time at their aircraft commander’s pre-departure briefing. This system is also used by commercial airlines, as it facilitates scheduling. Conversely, it reduces crew – and unit – cohesion, as did the fact that, with limited base housing, most people lived in the civilian community, further diluting personal relationships. For the most part, the Air Force members and their spouses assigned to Norton were strangers, coming together for brief, mission-dictated intervals, and then going their separate ways. That sort of function- versus mission-driven construct can obviously work, and well, but in my view it is antithetical to building the team spirit at the heart of many military and civilian enterprises.

On my return from Altus, I learned I had been assigned to the 63rd Airlift Squadron, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Burt Powers, a rising MAC star who was getting an essential punch in his ticket en route to stardom. His office
was my first stop. He carried himself with the easy air of the anointed, sure of his place, present and future. Lean, tan, and fit, he looked out of place in the tired, World War II-vintage building that housed his unit. He spent a good hour walking me through the wing and the squadron mission briefings, chatting about family and casually taking my measure. We got on well, and I felt comfortable as I left his office for my next stop: the operations officer, a lieutenant colonel who would assign me to my new duty, whatever that might be. When I reached his open door, he was absorbed with something on his desk. Hearing my knock, he gave me a disbelieving stare, and said, “God damn, a major; what the hell are you doing here?” He looked and sounded a lot like Dorene’s father, J.O., and his greeting reminded me of my first encounter with that gruff Texan back in Norwalk – only this time there was no Veda to run to. He looked like he had been ridden hard and put away wet. He was a smoker, with leathery skin, bloodshot eyes, and a pot belly. He was a career airlifter who had seen it all, done it all, and now saddled with keeping a hotshot squadron commander out of trouble until he got promoted and moved on. “Sir,” I replied, “I am reporting for duty.” “Well, that’s just dandy,” he snorted, “now get down the hall and straighten out that pilot section” (MAC squadrons were organized by crew specialties). And so began one of the oddest interludes of my career.

The pilot section was housed in the last of four rooms of the building, opening off the hallway. The first three rooms were the offices of the chief flight engineer, chief loadmaster, and chief navigator. Presuming that I had just been assigned as the chief pilot, I walked into my new office, a large, unadorned room cut in half by a long waist-high counter to the right of the door. The counter was open at its center to allow passage to a working area that accommodated two young lieutenants, whom I took by their management tools to be schedulers. Behind them, sitting at a desk on a platform a step higher than the main floor, was a captain, who seemed a bit frazzled and very uptight, a condition that noticeably worsened when I announced myself as Major Butler, the new chief pilot. “But,” he said plaintively, “I am the chief pilot. Nobody told me I was being replaced.” “Bob,” I replied, noticing the name plate on the desk, “I guess the ops officer wanted me to be the bearer of that news. Sorry it comes as a surprise, but here we are, so let’s deal with it. I obviously will need your expertise to get up to speed, so let’s get started.” I grabbed a chair, sat it beside his, motioned him to take it, and then took charge of my new desk. “Let’s begin with the basics, Bob. Talk to me about our pilots.” With a knowing glance at the two schedulers, Bob said, a bit smugly, “Sir, we have one hundred and twenty pilots; where do you want to start?” I was astonished by the number, which represented far more pilots than a squadron
this size should ever require, but, unruffled, I replied, “Well, Bob, I’m sure you have an alpha roster handy. Pull it out, and let’s start with ‘A’.”

To his credit, Bob knew the pilots well: families, where they lived, strengths, special skills and talents. There were a handful of flight examiners and instructors, a sizeable complement of line pilots, and a superabundance of copilots, resulting, I expect, from a deliberate overproduction in anticipation of wartime requirements that had not materialized. After grinding through about a third of the roster, we had just started down the “Hs” when Bob commented that I didn’t have to worry about Lieutenant Harris (I have protected his real name) because, “He doesn’t fly anymore.” My alarm bells started ringing. “And why would that be, Bob? Is he medically disqualified?” “Oh, no, sir, he just doesn’t believe we should be in Vietnam and doesn’t want to be part of the war effort.” “So, Bob, is he grounded, up on charges, in the brig, what is the deal?” “Sir, he’s a really good guy, an Academy grad in fact. We haven’t told anybody. We have far more copilots that we need, so we just don’t bug him. He hasn’t flown in months.”

I could hardly believe my ears. These guys were harboring a conscientious objector, an Air Force Academy graduate, rated pilot, non-current in his requirements but still drawing his salary and flight pay – and they didn’t see anything wrong with that! What other snakes were lurking in this pit? I decided to deal with the issues in the order they came up. “Get Lieutenant Harris on the phone for me, right now,” I demanded in my steeliest voice. “Well, sir,” replied the scheduler, “He lives in the mountains. I don’t know if this number is current.” “Dial it,” I said. A sleepy voice answered, “What do you want?” “Lieutenant Harris, this is Major Butler, your new chief pilot. We need to talk.” “Don’t have time. I’m supposed to pick up my girlfriend at the airport, and I’m running behind.” “Lieutenant, let me put it to you this way. If you aren’t standing in front of my desk within the next two hours, I am going to have you arrested for desertion. That is not a threat, it is a promise. Don’t test me. Be here.” Bob was stunned, but the scheduler looked something between amused and appreciative. There was a lot going on here that I needed to know about.

We pressed on through the list until a little after noon when a bearded, sandal-clad apparition appeared at the doorway, wearing cut-off jeans and an Air Force Academy sweatshirt. “Lieutenant Harris, I presume. Please come in. Gentlemen, why don’t you all go get some lunch. Be back in an hour.” Jack Harris was angry, confused and very much on edge. This turn of events had caught him completely off guard. Having looked through his record, I knew he was far above average in his flying skills, a future IP, perhaps more. His fitness reports had been glowing. Something or someone had intervened in his life a
few months ago and steered him onto a path of self-destruction. I immediately suspected the girlfriend.

I motioned for him to take a seat, leaned back in my chair and started gently probing. It became quickly apparent that here sat a bright, capable young man who had been swept up in anti-war rhetoric by the new love of his life and couldn’t reconcile his desire for an Air Force flying career with her contempt for his profession and his growing doubts about the morality of his country’s intervention in Vietnam. By the end of our conversation, I decided he was worth saving if he wanted to pay the price. “Jack, here’s the deal. What you cannot do is have it both ways: dodging your professional oath and obligations, while still commissioned and drawing a paycheck. I want you to get yourself cleaned up, get recurrent in the airplane, and then I am going to put you on command post duty for one month. At the end of that time, you come back and tell me which one it’s going to be: all the way in or all the way out.” To his credit, he took the offer, met the terms, and turned his life around. I chalked it up as a save. That turned out to be the easiest problem I would have to work in the months ahead.

Bob and I finished the list, and I called it a day. “Tomorrow, we will start through management procedures. I’ll be very interested to learn how we keep track of this army of pilots.” The answer was very disturbing. We didn’t keep track of them, at least not on any organized basis. The schedulers knew who liked to fly frequently and who just wanted enough time to stay current. They never had any problem filling the available missions, so this laissez-faire process seemed efficient and reasonable. The problem was they had no idea where most of our pilots were at any given time, in the local area or absent without leave, sick or healthy, in the hospital or in jail. We were subject to periodic inspections that required every pilot to be readily available for in-flight or ground testing within two hours. We didn’t even know if their phone numbers were current.

The following Monday, I had the schedulers run an availability check of all 120 pilots. It was a disaster. Many did not answer their phones, several numbers were wrong or out of service, and, in a couple of cases, the guys were between moves and didn’t even have a phone. Further, I noted that the schedulers were getting a lot of grief. Therefore, I told them to start again at the top of the list and inform each of these miscreants that the new chief pilot wanted to see every one of them in the base theater on Friday morning at 8:00 a.m. At the appointed day and hour, the place was filled with a bunch of very tight-jawed aviators. Their sullen mood only darkened when I introduced myself as the new lawman with a new set of rules. “Henceforth,” I declared, “every
single one of you will ‘call in’ to the schedulers every day, to ensure I know your
status and availability. Anyone who does not will ‘report in’ at my office for a
month at 7:00 a.m. The ‘whatever works’ scheduling process is dead; from this
point forth missions will be doled out equitably; everyone will fly his share.
Finally, anyone who quarrels with a scheduler, or who tries to weasel out of
a flight, will pull scheduler duty for a week, regardless of rank or seniority. All
personal problems will be addressed to me, and my door will always be open.
I welcome your pertinent suggestions and comments, but good order and dis-
cipline are the new watchwords. Dismissed.” Game on.

As promised, I brought the hammer down on the first violation. The fol-
lowing Monday, I heard my scheduler on the losing end of a telephonic shout-
ing match with a senior captain who did not want to come in on Tuesday for his
annual flight check. I picked up on the line and asked the nature of the prob-
lem. “Well,” said the irate voice, “I am a regional supervisor for Amway, and
we are having our quarterly sales meeting tomorrow.” “Who,” I asked, “au-
thorized you to take a position with Amway?” “No one,” he sniffed, “my wife
and I have been selling their products for years. The people in the squadron
love them.” That did it. “Number one, get your ass in here tomorrow morning
and take your flight check. That is a direct order. I want you here at four a.m.,
where you will report to me in a military manner. If you do not show, I will have
you court-martialed. Number two, you are hereby directed to cease forthwith
selling products to anyone in this squadron. That is an abuse of your rank and
authority as an officer, and I will not tolerate it. Number three, welcome to
scheduler duty.” He showed as ordered, passed his check ride, and then I was
stuck with the little twit for five days while he learned to appreciate the life of
a scheduler. Word spread rapidly that I meant business.

Amidst trying to bring my charges to heel, I finished my local area check,
learned a handful of tactical mission maneuvers, and set out on my first Pacific
run. MAC overseas flights take place in what is called the “system,” an array of
command posts in key locations like Hickam AFB, Hawaii, manned by control-
ners who marry aircraft, crews, cargo and destinations. While some crews de-
part home base with a specific or special mission that they fly end-to-end, most
land at their initial destination, off-load their cargo, and then go into crew rest,
which ends when they get an “alert” call from that station’s airlift command
post telling them to report for their next mission assignment. From Hickam,
that could be to any one of a dozen locations along the Asian rim, from Japan
down through the Philippines, Australia and into Southeast Asia and the war
zone. A crew was typically in the system for a week to ten days, crossing time
zones, the International Date Line, and a host of national boundaries, eating
whatever was available at snack bars, trying to sleep in ratty dormitories, becoming increasingly sleep-deprived, and running out of clean clothes, energy and patience with snotty command post controllers whose only interest was moving stuff from one location to another as fast as possible. It was a very trying business. Although the C-141 flies like a dream, it is a cargo plane, big, noisy, complex, and demanding of unwavering crew discipline. Every duty is controlled by checklists, which must be read and responded to precisely, given that, as noted above, MAC crew members are “standardized” like the airlines. As the crew’s time in the system increases, so does the amount of personal stuff they purchased along the way, all of which has to be downloaded at every stop, stashed, then retrieved and reloaded before the next leg. This process, known as the “bag drag,” becomes increasingly onerous and time-consuming, affecting both mission planning and cargo loading.

There was another cultural aspect to the system that I did not experience again until I learned the submarine business. When a sub puts out to sea, and the order comes to submerge, the crew undergoes a collective personality change. As the hatch closes and the dive begins, movements slow, voices lower, and a quiet camaraderie takes hold as the exquisite teamwork of life underway begins afresh. In the MAC System, the sense is more of resignation, hunkering down, dealing with the abuse, and hoping for the preferred destinations with familiar bazaars, night clubs, and bargirls. What you do away from the airplane is your business; the one cardinal rule is to always show up for the mission ready to fly. The system was a world apart; as I was soon to learn, some lived a very different life within it. My first overwater trip introduced me to a number of wrinkles in MAC lore, to wit, my grizzled flight engineer’s offer to extend our Hickam stay on the return leg, by covertly creating a maintenance problem that would ground our airplane for one day or two, my choice.

As I got to know my pilots individually, it was easier to sort out the wheat from the chaff. I had a typical bell curve: a few real jewels, a mass of the competent but average, and a handful who had no business wearing a uniform. I started weeding out the riff-raff, monitoring the just-do-the-job crowd, and looking for ways to reward the achievers. My best option was the periodic Australia runs, a week “down under,” with a couple of coast-to-coast resupply runs and a lot of free time in Sydney, a great party town. This was a perfect opportunity to recognize the guys who were pulling the toughest duty and volunteering for more. When I sat down with my schedulers to work it out, they quickly disabused me of the notion these were my missions to control. The Australia runs, I was informed, were the province of the operations officer. He always went and he decided who went with him. Not surprisingly, they
somehow always seemed to be the same people. I decided to look more closely at his flying record. Besides Australia, he had one other ironclad pattern. He scheduled himself to fly into Vietnam on the last day of every month and fly out the next day, the beginning of a new month. Having been in the theater, I saw his game instantly. He got credit for two months of combat pay while spending less than twenty-four hours in the war zone. Max return for minimum risk. He was playing the system and winning big time. It made me sick to my stomach. I couldn’t do anything about his little duck-in-and-out game, but I was determined to get my pilots some room on the Australia missions. First, I had to earn his confidence by finishing my rebuilding of the pilot section and getting through the annual Operational Readiness Inspection, which hit two months after I came on board.

I was proud of my troops, at least the ones I allowed to participate in the ORI missions. With so many pilots, I had a fair amount of latitude and of course put our best under the gun. I also got a closer look at the ops officer’s ability to game even a group of seasoned inspectors. As we approached the two-hour mark, he stuck his head in the doorway and asked if everyone had made the mandatory availability check-in to satisfy the squadron recall. I told him we were at 95%, which was more than good enough to satisfy the criteria. He said, “No, you are now at one hundred percent; I’ll pass it up the line.” As it turned out, we made the mark shortly thereafter, but he was taking no chances. Between the machinations of the ops officer and the actual performance of the squadron, Lieutenant Colonel Burt Powers’ airlift squadron earned an outstanding rating, assuring his promotion and departure, which came four months later.

With that obstacle behind us, I decided the time had come to bell the cat about Australia. I first sought the advice of the very sharp senior captain who served as Assistant Operations Officer how best to go about this delicate mission. He suggested that I start the dialogue by asking our mutual ops officer if I could tag along on the next mission to learn the drill, a request he had no choice but to accept. I wouldn’t displace one of his favorites, and the chief pilot had every right to know all aspects of the Pacific System. I flew as command pilot on all of the in-country missions, while my boss did whatever he did for the week. If nothing else, the ten days convinced him I was a competent airman and capable leader, so when I broached the proposition of using selected Australia runs as a means of rewarding outstanding performers he took the bait, opening one slot a month to use as I saw fit.

At the seven-month point, this was proving to be an unsettling and dissatisfying tour. I was appalled by the circumstances I inherited and the poor
leadership at every level. No one in my chain of command visited the pilot section while I was present, nor to my knowledge flew with one of my crews. There was no squadron-level camaraderie, no sense of wing identity. This was a punch-the-clock, head-down and get-the-job-done outfit, but not much else. From a professional perspective, I got to exercise my dormant leadership skills, untested since 13th Squadron days at the Academy, but otherwise, staying up for the daily grind of managing the Pilot Section in a second-rate outfit became an exercise in self-discipline. In some respects, we were a mirror of the broader malaise affecting the Air Force, the military services, and the country in general. By early 1973, the downward spiral of events in Southeast Asia had sparked a growing tide of discontent, campus unrest, and street demonstrations. Worse, the services were suffering a series of ugly racial incidents that prompted a mandatory Department of Defense race-relations program. The first session I attended at Norton precipitated a near-riot in the classroom when the white instructor, who had just read a passage from the Bible, placed it on a table, read from another text, and put it down on top of the Good Book. That provoked a cry of outrage from a black NCO in the audience, who charged toward the podium to exact retribution for this perceived sacrilege, cheered on by several other sympathetic observers. I was the senior person in the room and the only field-grade officer present, so this became my problem. I rose to my feet and in the sternest tone I could muster ordered the NCO to stop. I walked to the front of the room, picked up the Bible and asked if there were any Christians present. Taken aback, the incipient mob quieted, and most held up their hands, including the NCO. “Then start acting like it,” I said. “This class is over. Go home and think about how you failed your faith today.”

I wasn’t much of a Christian myself during this period. The long trips out in the system, coupled with the endless niggling problems of babysitting a bunch of young, largely unschooled pilots with too much time on their hands, had taken its toll. I was neglectful of family commitments, prone to fits of impatience and even anger, all uncalled for. I still had some growing up to do. Dorene covered for me as best she could with the children, taking the brunt of my unseemly behavior. I was still a long way from learning to balance my responsibilities to the Air Force with those to my family.

In April, the squadron was tapped for an extraordinary opportunity, which introduces a lengthy anecdote whose professional value would not play out for many years to come and which the reader can pass over without harm to the thread of the present narrative. The story was the product of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s initiative to restore diplomatic relations with China, one that set the stage for President Nixon’s historic trip to Beijing. That in turn
produced an agreement to open a U.S. consulate in China’s capital, and the President wanted it done now. Someone had to take care of the logistics end of the business by ferrying in the essentials to get the place up and running: a vehicle, furnishings, and office supplies – you get the picture. That someone turned out to be me. With a handpicked crew, I was off on a Friday to Andrews AFB, just outside Washington, D.C. That would allow the entire weekend to complete the complex loading process. Our massive stash of cargo would be “floor-loaded,” rather than placed on rolling pallets, which the Chinese were not equipped to handle. We spent the two days at the State Department (State) being briefed on the approved flight plan, and some protocol basics. We were also assigned a seasoned China hand from State to help us avoid any cultural missteps.

On Monday, we flew to Hickam AFB in Honolulu, overnighted, and flew on to Andersen AFB, Guam, for two days of crew rest before the final legs into Shanghai and Beijing. A glitch arose when the copilot discovered he had been given the passport of another copilot in the squadron. He was devastated, but by a stroke of fortune, his document was put on an aircraft going into the system that day and arrived the morning we were due to depart from Guam. We took a crew photo prior to boarding, dressed in the civilian suits that our State representative insisted upon. Our Chinese hosts, military and civilian alike, would all be dressed in the plain, rank-free Mao-suits, garb common to the era, so we would mimic their custom.

The flight plan took us over Japan and thence to Shanghai. As we reached China’s territorial waters, we crossed a saw tooth line on our navigational chart that said, “Aircraft crossing this line may be fired upon without warning.” Dialing in the frequency we had been given, I broadcast in the blind, “Shanghai Approach, this is Air Force 66128, requesting permission to land.” In clipped British English, a voice immediately replied, “Ah, roger, Air Force 66128, this is Shanghai Approach, remain on this frequency for a radar-guided descent and landing on runway 27; start a turn now to a heading of 1-8-0.”

We broke out of the clouds at 500 feet and touched down at 3:00 p.m. on a rough runway. A follow-me truck guided us to the chocks, where awaited a three-man delegation, all dressed in gray, open-collar, long-sleeve shirts and matching trousers. We shut down the engines and exited the aircraft, where we were warmly greeted by our hosts, an interpreter doing the honors. We were assured our plane would be properly fueled, and then were told, “You are hungry.” With that puzzling declaration, we boarded an airport van and headed for the terminal, where we spent the next two hours consuming a seven-course “snack” and making polite but painful small talk amidst much
smiling and head nodding.

When the plane was ready, we said our goodbyes and climbed into the cockpit, to find the jump seat and the navigator’s position filled by two young, expressionless Chinese men sitting ramrod straight, wearing headsets, and looking as if they owned the place. I glanced at my navigator, Joel Ruiz, a garrulous, hail-fellow-well-met, and shrugged as if to say “Let’s play this as it lies.” Joel whipped off his flight cap, put it on the head of his new stand-in, took a seat on the bunk, and watched as the rest of us strapped in. When I reached for the scroll to start the checklist, Joel stood, retrieved his cap, and said in a cheery voice, “OK, I’ll take it from here.” The Chinese lad replied in a flat but firm voice, “I do.” An interesting turn of events. The navigation panel in a C-141 stands some three feet high, spans some four feet right to left, and is crammed with a host of complex equipment that requires months of study to master, not to mention the challenge of participating in the highly ritualized routines of a crew-served aircraft. I decided to press ahead and see what happened next. To this day, I remain amazed and mystified by what then unfolded. Both men played their roles perfectly. They tuned up their equipment, responded accurately to the checklist, and navigated us to Beijing, making every radio call and position plot on time and on target. Had this been a check ride, I would have given them a perfect score.

The arrival in Beijing was the same song, second verse. Three men, similarly dressed, greeted us warmly, assured us the airplane would be unloaded, refueled and safely guarded for the remainder of our forty-hour stay. They again declared, “You are hungry.” Then it was once more into a van and off to the terminal, where we are our second seven-course snack in less than two hours. While we dined, I watched a line of ancient flatbed trucks and an army of workers make short work of unloading the plane. I was gaining a whole new appreciation for a people I had mentally consigned to the backward nuclearnation club, but this would be a long tutorial. I would retrace my steps on this journey twenty-six years later, older, wiser, but still a novice. Penetrating the mysteries of China made dealings with the Soviet Union seem positively transparent.

We boarded a bus and departed for our hotel in the heart of Beijing, a relatively new facility built to house and impress outsiders. En route, our man from State informed us that a formal dinner was being held in our honor, location unannounced. That left little time to get to our rooms, which were modern, pleasant, and spotless, to change and get back on the bus. I roomed with Vince, the copilot I had brought along in addition to spell the Stan Eval pilot in the right seat. Vince was a likeable and innocent young man who was in a
mild state of shock at the events swirling around his head. From the hotel, we were whisked off to a magnificent building and into a grand ballroom where we were arrayed at two large, circular tables that seemed lost in the huge expanse. We sat four Americans and five Chinese hosts at each table. To my right sat a very elderly man who could have been of any age from sixty to six hundred. On my left sat a Chinese interpreter, who was flanked by the State rep. The tables, each with a lazy Susan, were splendidly set, to include a forest of glasses and one thimble-sized vessel filled with a clear liquid that promised extreme potency.

As we took our seats, doors swung open, and the first course was paraded from the kitchen in what looked to be vats of steaming grease. My host spun the lazy Susan. With his chopsticks, he plucked a roughly two-inch square of pale, mottled mystery meat and put it on my plate. When all had been served, he picked his piece of meat up with great relish and deposited it in his mouth, signaling me to do likewise. It was inedible, in consistency and aroma. Had it not been presented as food, my guess would have been vulcanized rubber, marinated in spoiled fat. Desperate for an out, my mind turned to my napkin, at which point my new friend rose with a toast to Chinese-American friendship. He picked up the thimble, turned directly to face me and said, “Gombei motai,” which the interpreter whispered meant, “bottoms up.” I reached for mine, clinked his, and tossed it down. Big mistake. I felt as if my head had exploded. My eyes filled with tears, my ears were ringing, and a rivulet of molten lava made its way from my throat to my stomach. I smiled weakly, sat down before my knees gave way and took deep breaths. When feeling returned to my mouth, I realized that whatever I had been chewing was now tasteless and a lot more malleable. I finished it off, and leaned over to ask the State expert what I had just choked down.

“In the traditional Peking duck dinner,” he said, “every course is a different part of the duck. We started with the web clipped from between the toes, a great delicacy. The drink is a very high quality rice wine called motai, also very potent, which is traditionally taken in one swallow. I’d go easy on it.” That was advice I planned to take. And then the second course arrived. It looked like a large green golf ball, which when split in half revealed a black core. My fears were confirmed when the interpreter allowed that, “These are extraordinary, very old eggs, which have been exquisitely preserved.” They easily surpassed the marinated duck webbing on the scale of things I could not imagine ever putting in my mouth. I got a small bite past my nose, knew I was going to gag, so I stood up, returned a toast to American-Chinese relations, and pounded down my refilled thimble of motai. While my taste buds were still anesthetized, I got
the remainder of the egg down and wondered how many more toasts would be required to get me through the next five courses.

The answer was fifteen, the last just after midnight. By then, my aged host and I were the only people in the room who remained conscious. Having lost the interpreter after twelve or so, the two of us conducted a quiet contest of wills as the rest of the guests passed out one by one. He finally called it quits, bowed gracefully and clapped his hands. Men appeared from every corner, helped my crew to their feet and carried them to the waiting bus. I was determined to make it on my own, a performance that would have made Buster Keaton proud. I started counting backwards from a thousand, hoping to make it to the hotel before getting sick. I felt the bus stop just after reaching five hundred, which was much too soon to be the hotel. Then, a voice declared, “You want to shop,” and the door snapped open. We were parked in front of a three-story building with every light ablaze, at one in the morning. Being the only one capable of dismounting, I carefully stepped down from the bus and was led into a very elegant store which abounded with goods of every description, from teak furniture to magnificent jade, rich tapestries and rugs, fine clothing, innumerable paintings, all priced far beyond my meager means. Not wanting to be rude, I spent the next hour going up and down every aisle on every floor, resting my hand on the counters for support, willing myself to keep my head up and my food down.

Having done some justice to the occasion, I indicated it was time to re-board the bus. By now its occupants had begun to show signs of life and managed to get themselves to their rooms when we reached the hotel. My copilot and I headed straight for the bathroom where I pulled rank and threw up in the toilet, leaving him the sink or the tub, his choice. I crawled into bed and passed out until the sun rose and stirred me awake. I sat up and was startled to see my roomie lying on his back on top of his sheets, covered from head to toe in wet towels. His labored breathing signaled that he was alive, albeit one step removed from mummification. I stood gingerly and edged toward the shower. Then I saw the note that had been slipped under the door. Breakfast would be served in thirty minutes, and then we were scheduled for a tour of the Forbidden City, an honor reserved for only the most distinguished visitors. I resuscitated my companion and told him that no matter how bad he felt, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. That proved an understatement.

It was a holiday in China, which curiously required the Forbidden City to be closed to the public, thereby allowing a private tour for us. Our host was the man in charge of this magnificent walled complex, inaccessible to outsiders for nearly a quarter-century and equally inaccessible to all but the retinue serving
the Chinese Emperor for several centuries before that. We entered through a small door dwarfed by the huge gates into which it was set, stepped into a vast courtyard whose expanse we crossed, and then mounted steps leading to another set of giant doors. We entered what appeared to be a throne room, wherein sat a colossal Buddha on an elevated platform, surveying the splendor of his surroundings, exquisitely carved walls and icons of every manner. We were given a few moments to admire the setting and then proceeded through a door on the far side, out into another sweeping courtyard, up steps into another stunning throne room – and repeated this cycle again and again.

By the time we reached the heart of the City, most of my cultural fuses were blown; I had never seen anything remotely approaching the scale and opulence of this place. This ancient cosmopolis, built to house the Emperor, his family, his court and an army of artisans and administrators who served them, was a maze of interconnected rooms and byways filled with priceless artifacts. At its center lay the imperial chambers, replete with a small garden being tended by a stooped and very elderly worker manicuring a tree with a pair of scissors. In the royal bedchamber, my eyes went to a three-foot-tall golden pagoda, wrought in extraordinary detail, with two hinged doors protecting a large inner chamber. I asked our leader its purpose, to which he replied, “Oh, that was where the Empress stored her wig for the night.”

The tour ended in early afternoon, and we went straight to the airport for departure. I felt once more like Alice leaving Wonderland, awestruck, physically spent, and emotionally drained. I was overwhelmed by the tragic historical backdrop to the splendors I had seen. No surprise, I thought, why oppressed people are so often driven to revolution in the face of such extreme disparities in wealth and, in most cases, brutal treatment at the hands of self-appointed deities. I had seen it at Versailles, the palace of the French Sun King, and in many other European cities. Witnessing firsthand the consequences of unbridled power and rapacious greed on a global scale deepened my understanding of what was at stake in the historic struggle for human rights and government by the people. These were battles still being fought in my own country, in the streets of Watts and the hearings over Watergate. As I flew home across the vast reaches of the Pacific, I had a sense of foreboding. The towering thunderstorms flanking our route proved an apt metaphor for the twenty ensuing years of turbulence that would reshape the world, the governance of its citizens, the demarcation of their rights...and the balance of my career.

Soon after my return, I was called to my new squadron commander’s office. He was an earnest little man who seemed always on the phone working deals, and he informed me I had been selected for Armed Forces Staff College,
Airlift Pilot (1972 – 1973)

a five-month, joint-service, intermediate-level, professional education course located in Norfolk, Virginia. It would mean a permanent change of station with a new assignment to follow at the completion of the course. My time in MAC was being sharply curtailed. I was not unhappy at the prospect. The tour had served its purpose, exposing me to the airlift mission, allowing me to build flying time, and getting me some supervisory experience. Conversely, it had again been hard on the family, professionally unsatisfying, and endlessly frustrating because of over-manning and poor leadership. No good deed seemed to go unpunished, witness Dorene’s initiative to take a group of NCO wives to sign up for the “Women-Infants-Children Welfare Program,” to seek help in coping with tight budgets and absent husbands. That drew a rebuke from a senior wife that such “activism” would ruin my career. If ever such chastisement would prove utterly unfounded, surely this met the test; to the contrary, Dorene’s irreplaceable role in my life had long since been established, a role that I would come increasingly to appreciate as my career now took me to an entirely new level of responsibility.
We pulled into Norfolk late in the evening in early August, 1973, the night before my required reporting date. I was mentally down from the trip, out of sorts because my hair was out of limits and I didn’t relish starting my day looking for a barber shop. I was also on edge about competing in a program with top-notch officers from every service. I had been seven years away from competing in a full-blown academic environment, and I had no joint experience to draw on. My mood wasn’t improved by the city of Norfolk, a gritty Navy town, overrun with bars and strip clubs, dreadful military housing and dingy facilities. Fortunately, the Armed Forces Staff College (AFSC) was located on well-kept grounds and we had been assigned student quarters that were clean, adequate, and furnished well enough for us to move right in. The houses were arranged in a series of horseshoe cul-de-sacs along the periphery of a central street that looped around the campus. All of the essential locations were within walking distance, and all of our neighbors were students. It was a nice setting, and we quickly made friends, some with whom we would cross paths for years to come. Once I got my hair cut and got through the orientation program and into my twenty-man seminar, I started to feel more comfortable. My fellow students were for the most part smart, decent and likable: six each from the Army, Navy and Air Force, one Marine and an officer from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency. Our class also included a number of former prisoners of war who had been repatriated from North Vietnamese prisons. They were all held in the highest regard and were cut whatever slack was necessary to ensure their success in the program. The three instructors for my seminar—a Marine colonel, an Air Force colonel, and an Army lieutenant colonel—were fine officers, all of whom were likely in their terminal assignments, pleasant duty to finish up careers well-served. The Army rep, Lieutenant Colonel Clint Black, was one of the most knowledgeable
and professional officers I have ever known. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of joint matters, and was a superb teacher and a perfect role model for interservice cooperation. He became the standard against which I measured myself as a staff officer and joint commander for the remainder of my career.

The curriculum was focused and effective. We began by teaching each other the fundamentals of air, sea and ground power, based on lesson plans provided by the school. Then we were taught the basics of joint operations across the spectrum: strategy, tactics, firepower, logistics, intelligence, communications and so forth. The course concluded with the detailed planning and execution of a major joint operation, with students taking on various staff responsibilities. I was the commander of the joint task force charged with putting the plan together, briefing the instructors, and then executing it over several days of interactive play in a dynamic war game. This was the best professional training I had received to date, and it would prove its worth many times over.

I enjoyed all aspects of this hands-on, solution-oriented, twenty-three-week program. I was even allowed to write my required paper on security issues that were plaguing the school (found problem, fixed same). We participated as a seminar in an active sports program to which I made a decent contribution, despite having lost a step in physical fitness during the year in MAC. My confidence also grew with respect to my abilities as measured against an eclectic group of very capable contemporaries. Although I was becoming more secure in my testosterone-driven profession, I was still far from finding a comfort zone, with no Air Force major command home, not knowing whether my early promotion to major was an anomaly or a launching pad, and no senior staff experience. As I approached graduation from AFSC in January of 1974, all of these critical career factors were beyond my control. They would be resolved, in reverse order, over the course of the next three years, beginning with a phone call from Colonel Perry Smith, a former colleague from the Political Science Department.

Perry was a solid-gold guy, extremely bright, a true scholar-soldier, and a standout in the Poly Sci Department front-office ranks. His beautiful Georgia bride, Connor, daughter of a deceased military hero, was talented, charming and a perfect match. Shortly after I left the Academy for MAC, Perry had moved to the Air Force Headquarters Staff, better known as the Air Staff, in the Pentagon. Still tracking my career, he now wanted me to come to D.C. to fill an opening in the International Negotiations Branch of the Global Plans Division, part of the Deputy Directorate of Plans and Policy. It was exactly the right place for me at exactly the right time.

My professional growth and sense of accomplishment were in contrast to
my family’s unease. In addition to the deplorable surroundings of Norfolk, the
class the children from the AFSC campus had been atrocious. Adding insult to academic injury, military family children were bussed to that
to comply with the federal mandate for racial balance. That policy, how-
however noble its purpose, had severe downsides in Norfolk: long travel times and
putting military kids in harm’s way in a racially-charged environment where
violence was commonplace. We found the risk intolerable and enrolled Brett
and Lisa into a Catholic parochial school where they flourished. Lisa was se-
lected to do a reading at the Christmas play, where she performed flawlessly
in her beautiful, floor-length, velvet skirt and white ruffled blouse. They both
made the best of a difficult, short-term move. Brett was in his sixth school
since pre-kindergarten in Paris and Lisa in her third. Military children deserve
their own special medals for this peripatetic existence.

The AFSC course ended in late January. It was a confidence-building in-
terlude that was quickly tested by the next mountain to climb. I had come to
a crucial career juncture, positioned by fate, mentors, and performance for a
move to the major leagues of professional responsibility. I felt well prepared
for the move to the Pentagon. I had some acquaintance with the physical
structure, having periodically picked up my father after work when we lived
in Arlington. More importantly, I had labored in the company of very senior
officers and survived the fires of OEP. My speaking and writing skills were up
to par, and I was now well trained to get at the essence of complex issues in
short order. All of that would prove to be essential in the days ahead. However,
the most important qualities I would bring to my Pentagon duties had been
ingrained in my youth and reinforced at every subsequent step along my life’s
path: belief in myself, who I was and what I stood for; sheer, dogged persever-
ance; and a determination to succeed, no matter how long the odds or how
bleak the circumstances.
Our move to the D.C. area was greatly facilitated by the availability of the 9th Street house in Arlington, Virginia. My father had retired from the Department of the Army in 1969, and he and my mother moved back to Aunt Sister’s house in Oakland, Mississippi. They had leased rather than sold the house, anticipating that one day we might need it. Even better, the lease was up in December of 1973, so we moved right in from Norfolk in January 1974. My parents only asked that we make their payments on the circa 1956 mortgage, a generous gesture that eased the budget pressures we felt from the Hemet house. By this time, Dorene’s brothers, Jimmy and Buddy, no longer felt able to contribute to paying the Hemet mortgage, so we had absorbed the entire monthly payment. On top of that expense came the high cost of living in Northern Virginia. After a dozen years of married life, we were still counting every penny – a financial squeeze that dictated we remain a one-car family. That put an additional burden on Dorene. She had to chauffeur me back and forth to the Pentagon, a twenty-minute drive each way on a good day. Brett and Lisa were now enrolled in Ashlawn Elementary, an excellent school located just a few blocks away. Some of the neighbors were friends dating back to my high school days, so we were in comfortable surroundings. The Pentagon was an entirely different matter.

In a fit of whimsy, I decided to report to my new job on Valentine’s Day. Halloween would have been a more apt choice. However familiar the world’s largest office building may have looked on the outside, the interior was as alien a setting as I had ever encountered. Sited on nearly 600 acres in swampy ground on the Virginia side of the Potomac River, the Pentagon was designed in just three days, ground was broken thirty days later, on September 11, 1941, and the ribbon was cut after only sixteen months of construction. The structure was intended to house the War Department that is, U.S. Army Headquarters and its embedded Army Air Forces, which had been scattered throughout the Washington area. The Department of the Navy also moved in, although its
Marine Corps elements took up lodging in a clutch of multi-story frame buildings on a hilltop a half-mile to the north.

In 1974, the Pentagon housed roughly 23,000 occupants, encompassed over 17 miles of corridors, 131 stairwells, and 13 elevators. It was a small city, with an expansive shopping mall, clinics, barber shop, post office and a host of restaurants and private dining rooms. Owing to its age and hasty construction, the facility was a maintenance nightmare. Its five above-ground floors, stacked into five concentric, pentagonal rings labeled “A” at the center through “E” on the outside, were sadly outdated except for the most prestigious office areas. The below-ground level, with its additional “F” ring, was in even worse condition. Throughout most of the building, the walls were marked and scarred, halls poorly lit, offices cramped and stocked with mismatched, marred furniture; the narrow, inner corridors were frequently choked with excess items that might not be moved for months. Worse, the structure was filled with asbestos. For reasons historical and bureaucratic, there was no sense of ownership: its military residents rotated continuously, as did the senior civilian leadership. A time-honored little homily opined that the best view of the Pentagon was in a rear view mirror.

For two years after World War II, there had been no Department of Defense, only the autonomous War and Navy Departments, two enormous fiefdoms with no joint controlling authority but a long history of bitter rivalry. The National Security Act of 1947 was the first attempt to bring order and hierarchy to the business of U.S. national security. It created the CIA and the Defense Department, whose civilian secretary had limited authority over three military departments, each with a civilian head and a large staff of its own. The Department of the Navy continued to oversee the U.S. Navy and the USMC, while the War Department split into the Department of the Army and the Department of the Air Force, the latter administering the old Army Air Forces, newly-independent and renamed the U.S. Air Force. The onset of the Cold War with its underlying nuclear dimension further intensified service rivalry, especially between the Navy and the Air Force, who competed for pride of place as the nation’s first line of defense. Their battles over roles and missions in the late 1940s spilled into the headlines, prompted a revolt within Navy senior ranks, and triggered a mental breakdown that drove James Forrestal, the first Secretary of Defense, from office and into the Bethesda Naval Hospital, where he committed suicide. After that debacle, Congress strengthened the hand of the Secretary of Defense, but the services fought an unending battle against a strong, central civilian authority that continues, in muted form, to this day.

By the end of the Korean War, the DoD was the preeminent federal agency,
and the Pentagon had become the focal point and the symbol of United States military power. During the 1960s, as Lyndon Johnson plunged the nation into a full-blown war in Southeast Asia, that power grew immensely. When I came to work on the Air Staff in 1974, the Pentagon had become a target for the exploding anti-war sentiment, driven to a frenzy by Nixon’s illegal extension of the war into Cambodia in the spring of 1971. The President was also caught up in the rapidly expanding “Watergate” scandal. He was seen by many as trying to divert attention from his daily hammering in the Washington Post by upping the ante in nuclear arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. Secretary of State Kissinger had successfully concluded the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, or SALT I, despite tepid support from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he was pushing hard for conclusion of a follow-on SALT II treaty, which the services were fighting tooth and nail.

The service chiefs viscerally distrusted the Soviets, suspecting they were using the negotiations as cover for a massive strategic modernization program. They equally distrusted Secretary Kissinger, whom they perceived as having his own agenda quite apart from what they wanted or the country needed. Thus, as I took up residence in the five-sided leviathan, I was thrust into the center of a perfect storm: the global East-West struggle for ideological and military supremacy, the fractious superpower negotiations to bound the most dangerous and destructive weapons in their nuclear arsenals, and the Air Force and Navy battle for dominance in formulating U.S. nuclear strategy, assigning targets, and acquiring nuclear weapons and strategic delivery systems, with billions of dollars at stake.

I reported in to Colonel Perry Smith, who took me to meet the Global Plans Division (XOXXGI)\(^1\) chief, Colonel Ray Dunn, a wiry, soft-spoken man whose ready smile and wry sense of humor put me at ease and set the tone for his small but busy shop. I joined the three-man International Negotiations Branch (XOXXGI), partnering with Lieutenant Colonels Frank Jenkins, the branch chief, and Bob Albertson, two of the finest officers in anybody’s Air Force.

By chance, I had replaced an Academy classmate and fellow Olmsted Scholar Jack Wolcott, a deep below-the-zone promotee to major several years before and already on the lieutenant colonel list, a very fast burner who had made his reputation in the Strategic Air Command, then moved to the Air Staff and done a sterling job. I had been given big shoes to fill with no personal

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\(^1\) In my day, the Air Force staff in the Pentagon (the “Air Staff”) comprised deputates, directorates, deputy directorates, divisions and branches, each of which carried letter designators. Hence, my bureaucratic food chain in the Plans and Operations Deputate, in alphabetic soup, was: XO, XOX, XOXX, XOXXG, XOXXGI.
identity in the Strategic Air Command, the organization whose mission and tools of war were directly at stake in the strategic arms limitation talks. As I was soon to discover, from the Air Force and SAC’s perspective my role was to make damn sure that whichever arms got controlled belonged to somebody else.

The Global Plans Division encompassed four small offices nestled cheek-by-jowl, connected by an interior walkway that emptied into the E-Ring hallway on the fourth floor, a short walk from Corridor Ten. Across the hall were the offices of the DCS Plans and Operations (XO), Lieutenant General “Dutch” Huyser; his deputy, Major General Foster Lee Smith; the two-star Director of Plans (XOX); and the senior colonel (XOXJ) responsible for managing the directorate’s participation in the joint service arena. Frank, Bob and I shared one of the four offices, a shoe-box whose floor space was completely filled by our three desks and a dozen five-drawer file cabinets. It was a drab, depressing work space, an incongruous setting, I thought, for the important issues addressed within its confines.

My first day, a Tuesday in February 1974, was spent working my way through the in-processing maze, meeting my branch mates, and finding the closest men’s room and cafeteria. I had thought there might be an orientation program of some sort to help with navigating the Byzantine physical and organizational “corridors” of the Pentagon and to provide some insight into the daily life of action officers (AOs), the majors and lieutenant colonels who write and staff the paperwork that feeds the service and joint decision machinery. No such luck. This was sink-or-swim. My second morning in the office, I got thrown over Niagara Falls without a barrel. A decision of critical importance to the Air Force was due to be addressed Friday morning by General Huyser and the other services’ operations deputies, or ops deps, the three-star officers through whom all joint issues flowed on their way to consideration by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, no matter the subject. Frank Jenkins and Bob Albertson were both crashing on other urgent matters so I was it.

The subject at hand was the intended mission of a new Soviet TU-22 intermediate range bomber, known by its NATO designation as the Backfire. My task was to make the case that, despite its somewhat limited range, and a CIA-assessed role as a regional strategic bomber, the Air Force Intelligence view was more plausible, that is, with in-flight refueling over the Arctic, the Backfire could take off from the Soviet Union, strike the United States with a nuclear bomb, and then land in Cuba. That seemed reasonable to me, and I thought I could make a persuasive argument to that effect. Being new to the game, I failed to grasp the Air Force’s not-so-hidden agenda. If the Backfire
were reassessed as an intercontinental range, heavy bomber, that might mean billions of dollars in new funding for radar stations and air defense fighter-interceptors – both Air Force assets. In an era of constrained budgets, the other services feared those billions would come out of their pockets. Moreover, such a definition would strengthen a U.S. demand that the Backfire be included among the Soviet heavy bombers that would count against any ceiling on strategic delivery vehicles that might be negotiated in SALT II. Completely naive, I was being sent into a mine field without a detector.

I spent all of that day, much of the evening and all of the following day reading the intelligence data, doing range and refueling calculations, and getting my voluminous brief together. The result of this mammoth paper-gathering exercise was, in Pentagon parlance, a “package,” a meticulously organized bundle of background materials and point papers laying out arguments to be used by senior service principals. Destined for use in the joint arena, it had to conform to a rigid, exquisitely detailed format and to a schedule prescribed by a Joint Staff administrative directive. This standardized format was designed to ensure that no matter the subject, or the service raising the issue, everyone at the table would see exactly the same material, laid out in exactly the same manner, and delivered to each participant at exactly the same time. I finally manufactured all of the diverse materials for my package around 8:00 p.m., and gave them to the branch secretary, a seasoned veteran of the system, who had stayed late to help. She assured me she would get the package compiled and submitted by the prescribed deadline.

Dorene picked me up, got me home, fed me and then I tossed and turned for a few hours before returning to the office at 5:00 the following morning. I was due to brief the XOXJ at 6:00 a.m. and wanted to have the brief fresh in my mind. He had a reputation as short-tempered and combative, and I did not want to stumble right out of the box. In fact, I already had. When I walked into my dark office, the phone was ringing off the hook. I didn’t know where the light switch was, but I was able to locate the phone because the active line ID button was flashing. I picked up the receiver and identified myself. “Butler,” a very irate voice replied, “this is JB. Why didn’t you snowflake the ce-saf-em into the green you purpled?”

I was completely nonplussed. I had no idea who JB was, what he had just said, or what grave sin I had apparently committed that made him so upset. Falling back on my Academy training, I responded, “No excuse, sir,” prompting the angry retort, “Well, get down here and do it,” after which the line went dead. I felt like a complete fool, sitting in the dark at 5:00 a.m. in a still unfamiliar office, having just had my rookie butt chewed by someone I didn’t know
for something I didn’t understand. In addition, I had no idea where “here” was, much less what I was supposed to do, presuming I could get there. Not a good start to what would become a very long day.

At that moment, the lights snapped on and in walked Frank and Bob acting nonchalant, as if they came to work every day at this ungodly hour. They knew I had arrived because the offices were unlocked and I was the only one in the branch with an early brief. According me the courtesy of not asking why the hell I was sitting in the dark, Frank inquired how things were going. “Not well,” I replied, and recounted, word for word, the call from JB. “Ah,” says Frank, “not a big deal. JB isn’t a person, it’s a place, short for XOXJB, the office that handles the logistics of checking, copying and distributing joint packages. The guy who called you runs the place and he is always upset about something. It comes with his territory. ‘Ce-saf-em’ is the acronym, CSAFM, which applies to the one-page cover sheet on your package. The acronym stands for ‘Chief of Staff Air Force Memorandum.’ ‘Snowflaking’ is shorthand for a drill we go through of slicing up the page containing your proposed answers to opponents’ anticipated arguments and taping them on the back of the page that precedes these challenges so the principal has both the questions and answers under his eyes. That’s what our secretary failed to do. ‘Green’ refers to the color of the paper designated for a package that has reached the three-star, Ops Deps level. White paper, or ‘flimsy’ as it’s called, is used at the action officer or draft level, and buff is used for the package developed for two-star consideration within each service. If a green package goes through the Ops Deps and ultimately gets approved by the Joint Chiefs, it is reprinted with a diagonal red stripe. That way anyone can tell at a glance where a package stands in the complex joint process. Finally, to ‘purple’ an issue is a quick way of saying that at least one service disagrees with its central premise. Since your issue began with the premise that the Backfire is only a regional bomber as opposed to an intercontinental range, heavy bomber, the Air Force Chief of Staff took objection. Now, grab a pair of scissors and let’s go to JB and get the snowflaking done.” This, I thought, could not be happening.

By the time I got the package fixed, I was due at XOXJ, where I was ushered in to see the grim-faced colonel, whose career would be made or broken in this high-visibility, high-powered job. He listened intently to what I had to say, flipped through the package and dismissed me with a curt nod of the head. I would spend the rest of the morning on-call either to address any questions that might come from up the line, or to go to the XO conference room where General Huyser would debrief the interested staff on what had transpired in the Ops Deps meeting around the table in the Tank, as the Joint Staff senior
conference room was called. That call came at 11:00 a.m. I took a seat along the side of the room near the head of the table. The Director of Plans sat at Huyser’s right, and the colonel from XOXJ sat at his left, with several other colonels arrayed in the remaining chairs at the table. General Huyser said that, as expected, the other services and intelligence agencies were adamantly opposed to the Air Force position regarding the capability of the Backfire, so the matter would be bumped up to the Chiefs for discussion in the Tank that afternoon. The Navy had introduced a paper at the meeting, which General Huyser took out of his briefcase and handed in my direction. Presuming it was intended for me, the action officer, I put out my hand and took it. Big mistake. As the meeting ended, the XOXJ came over to me and said, “My office, now.” I followed him down the hall and into his room, whereupon he closed the door, got in my face and said, “Don’t you ever again touch a piece of paper coming from the Tank before I do, is that clear?” I squeaked a feeble, “Yes, sir,” and trudged back to my cubicle, angry at this preemptory treatment and chagrined at not knowing the ropes.

The Chiefs’ session that afternoon did not go any better, despite the fact that General Brown now occupied the Air Force chair. He had been elevated from his position as commander of Systems Command to become the Air Force Chief of Staff in August of 1973, about the time I was entering AFSC. The Backfire issue gave me the first opportunity to see him since our visit at the Academy in 1972. He held the debriefing in his office, which I attended along with Huyser and the XOXJ. The package was fine, he said, but the other services weren’t about to budge on the Backfire range and mission issue. For now, the Air Force’s intelligence arm would continue to monitor the aircraft as its operational role matured, looking for any evidence that it was being slotted for an intercontinental bombing role.

At the close of the meeting, General Brown took me aside for a chat, briefly catching up on family news, a tête-à-tête not missed by either of my senior companions. The general knew exactly the signal he was sending, one that was reinforced two months later by the appearance of my name on the lieutenant colonel promotion list, three years earlier than the so-called “on-time” point in a career. At this point, I was also becoming a decent action officer, having survived the initial baptism of fire and carried the ball well enough on several tough issues. That performance bought me an off-the-wall assignment that could have derailed my future entirely.

I was greeted on my arrival at the office one day in late April of 1974 with the news that I was being detailed to Mr. Don Cotter, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Atomic Energy, for an assignment of unspecified nature and
duration. On finding Mr. Cotter’s suite of offices on the third floor, I was wel-
comed by a studious-looking Army colonel named Don Marshall. Don sat me
down in his modest office, which was bursting at the seams with books and pa-
pers stacked on his desk, a side table and much of the floor. He apologized for
the covert way I had been pressed into his service, but the sensitive nature of
the task dictated the utmost discretion. That was a decided understatement.
The Secretary of Defense, James Schlesinger, had become very concerned
that his counterpart in the State Department, Henry Kissinger, was about to
give away the arms control store in an upcoming June Summit in Moscow.
Schlesinger had decided to confront Kissinger on this issue in an NSC meeting
to be held shortly before the meeting of the two heads of state. His objective
was to discredit Kissinger’s management of the United States participation in
strategic arms limitation negotiations, going back to the beginning of the SALT
process in 1969. My job was to build the case for Mr. Cotter, who would take it
to Secretary Schlesinger. I had three weeks to get it done.

This, I thought, was very odd duty for a military officer. It was one thing
for Don Marshall, a senior colonel near retirement, to get between two Nixon
Administration heavyweights, but I knew from my OEP experience that this
was very risky business, especially for someone relatively junior, who could
easily be tossed overboard if things blew up. But, trusting that my three-star
XO boss, General Huyser, would protect me, I soldiered on, spending the
first week buried in the classified archives of SALT history. As I absorbed this
mountain of documentation, I could see a pattern emerging from Kissinger’s
negotiating tactics, when he had been President Nixon’s National Security
Advisor.

To give the pattern some structure, I created a matrix on a large piece of
paper tacked to a wall in the little office I had been assigned. I plotted a dozen
arms control issues down the left side, portrayed and contrasted on a time
line running from left to right, showing how the U.S. position on each issue
had evolved versus the Soviet stance, through a number of successive nego-
tiating sessions. This was concluded by detailing the commitments ultimately
captured in the 1972 SALT I Interim Agreement. The picture that emerged was
compelling: in every case, the United States had moved considerably away
from its initial positions toward those of the Soviet Union. Don Marshall was
delighted and arranged for me to present my findings to Mr. Cotter and a
handful of other participants. Given my work’s sensitivity, Don had me give
the briefing on a Saturday morning, at the home of Army Lieutenant General
Ed Rowny, the representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the U.S. SALT II
negotiating team. General Rowny occupied a set of elegant quarters on the
grounds of the historic Fort McNair, located along the banks of the Potomac River in southeast Washington, D.C.

As I drove to the meeting, dressed in civilian clothes, I mused about the propriety of a military member of the negotiating team hosting a covert event whose purpose was to undercut civilian authority on a vital security issue. I thought back to the case studies I had taught in the Defense Policy 412 course at the Academy illuminating instances of civilian and military leaders colliding over national security matters, of which the most notorious had been General MacArthur’s contemptuous treatment of President Truman during the Korean War. I was about to enter a treacherous arena where the principle of civilian control of the military becomes tenuous, subject to competing agendas and personalities. This game was as much about personality and power as it was about propriety and authority.

I made my presentation and moved to the sidelines, as the small audience began debating their next steps. The meeting broke up without any definitive conclusion. Don Marshall thanked me for my efforts and released me back to the Air Staff. He followed up with a very generous letter of commendation that was long on superlatives and short on facts. General Huyser was no fool. He called me to his office, thanked me for stepping up to a difficult task, and told me to destroy any copies of my paper and never to talk about it. I was happy to oblige him and returned to my office thinking that would be the end of such ad hoc adventures. Dead wrong. It was just the beginning of a three-year saga that would take me through a series of nine jobs, each lasting on average about four months. These would become the best of times and the worst of times. My career would blossom at the expense of my physical health, my emotional well-being and my relationship with Dorene and our children. It was Paris all over again: failure was not an option but the price of success would be very high.

I had been back in the international negotiations branch barely four months, when I returned to my office one afternoon and found a message on my desk that instructed me to go see Brigadier General Jasper Welch, a name I did not recognize. A ten-minute walk brought me to the location noted, a suite of what appeared to be empty offices. I opened the door to the reception area and seeing no one, called out, “Hello,” to which a voice from the furthest office on the right replied, “Back here, Butler.” I went to the door and looked inside, where sat with feet up on his desk the most unlikely general officer I had ever seen. His left shoe, which was pointed directly at the doorway, had a sizable hole in the bottom, his uniform looked like it had been slept in, the top button on his shirt was open and the knot on his tie was slewed to one side.
He looked to be about my height but was considerably heavier, leaning toward pudgy. His hair was tousled and his eyes had the look of a man who had just come off long, hard duty.

“The Chief,” he said, presumably referring to General David Jones, who had just replaced General Brown, now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “has given us an interesting task.” The “us” got my attention, he and I being the only people in the room. “The Air Force has got itself in a bind with too many strategic delivery systems coming down the pike and no roadmap to direct traffic or help the folks who have to pay for them understand how they all fit together. So, we get to figure it all out.” Now it was “we.” I’d been pressed into duty to some ill-defined destination with this disheveled engineer and the train was leaving the station. What in the world had I done to deserve this? Who had approved it? Might as well just ask, I decided; maybe there was an out. “What, may I inquire, has this to do with me?” “Well, Butler, the Chief told me I could have my pick of the action officer litter, and you are it. I’m looking at one other guy, but I want your input before bringing him on board. Meanwhile, it’s you, me and our secretary, Teri, who’s coming over from the White House. My title is Special Assistant for Strategic Initiatives and our office symbol is XOS. That puts us under the DCS for Plans and Operations for appearance’s sake and admin support, but I report directly to the Chief. We’ll move to our permanent offices in the XO area tomorrow. Make it happen.”

When I returned to Global Plans to clear out my desk, Perry Smith was waiting for me. “Sorry about that,” he said, “but it came straight from the top, a done deal before we knew about it. General Welch got your name from Don Cotter, for whom he spent the last year running a major task force charged to make the nation’s nuclear war plan more flexible. He did a terrific job, and the Chief has brought him back to the Air Staff to make sense out of the Air Force portion of U.S. strategic forces that will support the new nuclear targeting approach. Hang on, because you are in for one hell of a ride.” He wasn’t kidding. In the blink of an eye, I had once more become Alice, about to pass through General Welch’s rabbit-hole into a Wonderland of people, issues and events that were right out of mythology.

General Jasper Welch was a certified genius, a nuclear physicist who had trained under the renowned Dr. Luis Alvarez at Berkeley and developed basic design concepts widely used in United States nuclear weapons. He was a highly skilled analyst and strategic thinker who had been deeply involved in the creation of a host of weapons systems, including the family of long-range cruise missiles that was just beginning to emerge. His connections spanned an
array of think tanks and theorists, laboratories and scientists, research facilities, intelligence agencies and policy makers. I was about to step up from the arms control arena into the broader nuclear cosmos, a tight-knit, highly secretive universe populated by powerful minds, towering egos, clannish fiefdoms, stupendous budgets, ferocious competition and a singular, relentless dedication to preserving, improving, and expanding America’s nuclear arsenal.

General Welch was also a certified eccentric. His disdain for the trappings of officership was palpable, as if adherence to military custom and appearance was an affront to his intellectual independence. Early on, I bought a new set of ribbons for his uniform, since the version he was wearing was dirty and threadbare. Big mistake. He tossed my offering in the trash can without a word. I got the message. This was his world and I would have to adapt to it and to him. It would be well worth the effort. The year-long education that lay ahead would substantially enlarge the professional foundation that undergirded my work in this critical area for the remainder of my career. Moreover, the timing of the move from the International Negotiations Branch could not have been better. The political setting had changed suddenly and dramatically. President Nixon had resigned in disgrace and President Ford had inherited an unholy mess at home and abroad. His tenure was uncertain and he lacked the personal authority to orchestrate the complex arms control dialogue, which was about to enter a barren period marked by an intense renewal of U.S.-Soviet military rivalry. And, it was just as well, because, as General Welch noted, American strategic policy, planning and acquisition were caught up in a turbulent era characterized by interservice feuding and ugly internal Air Force battles over the modernization of U.S. heavy bombers and strategic missiles.

We settled into our new office, a small suite with a private room for General Welch and a reception area with desks for Teri, me and another prospective action officer. I plunged into the modernization issues with a vengeance. Part of my education was sitting in on the parade of briefings that Welch scheduled to be presented at all hours, day in and day out. Much of the detail was still beyond my ken, but watching General Welch was highly instructive. He had learned a crucial skill at the knee of his former boss and mentor, Lieutenant General Glenn Kent: absorbing and critiquing advocacy briefings, some running well over a hundred viewgraphs. I gradually learned the knack of finding the crux of complex issues, identifying key assumptions, which were often buried in a mountain of data, and testing them against facts, experience and just plain common sense. General Welch was a past master at this, zeroing in on seemingly inconsequential points that would unravel what had appeared to be an air-tight analysis.
I also sought out the key people in the Air Staff and elsewhere, from action officers to one- and two-star generals, who were responsible for developing rationale, planning force structure, programming and budgeting for Air Force strategic nuclear forces and making the case for these programs within and beyond the walls of the Pentagon. What I found was conflict, confusion, crossed wires and mixed signals throughout the vast network of responsible organizations. With respect to its family of intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs), for example, the Air Force was hell-bent on justifying the need for a new, ten-warhead missile, the M-X, by declaring the perfectly capable, three-warhead Minuteman III (MM III) to be vulnerable to destruction by a new generation of increasingly accurate Soviet ICBMs. That was a shameless abandonment of the logic of the sacrosanct Triad, the doctrine that a diverse strategic arsenal of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), long-range bombers and land-based ICBMs would enhance the strengths and mitigate the vulnerabilities of each of these weapons systems. Similarly, the bomber community was selling short the venerable B-52 fleet (the last plane had come off the production line in October, 1962) by declaring it too slow, and too susceptible to tracking by long-range radars, to perform its mission of penetrating deep into Soviet territory to deliver nuclear gravity bombs. This argument purposely ignored the substantial degradation of Soviet air defenses that could be achieved by precursor ballistic missile attacks on those defenses, the skill of the B-52 aircrews at low-level bombing, and the new family of air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs), fathered by General Welch and others, that would be entering the Air Force inventory over the next decade and that would greatly expand the stand-off reach and routing flexibility of the U.S. strategic bomber force.

The acquisition of the ALCM was a classic case of conflicted Air Force thinking and parochial concern. The manned aircraft community feared that unmanned, long-range cruise missiles might become so effective that they would become a threat not only to the enemy, but also to U.S. piloted combat platforms, whether bombers or fighters. Hence, my first task from General Welch was to find a way to describe the bomber-ALCM relationship that would support maintaining and modernizing both systems without putting the former at risk or overstating the capability for the latter. I managed to square the circle with a simple dictionary search, where early in the “A’s,” the word “adjunct” leaped off the page and into my typewriter: “Something added to another thing, but not essential to it.” A perfect descriptor, emphasizing the dominant role of the versatile manned penetrating bomber, whose mission could be terminated or modified from launch until an instant before release,
while underscoring the virtues of an ALCM force that would benefit from human decision-making up to the moment the missiles were launched, but would then allow the bomber to stand off from the most lethal Soviet air defenses and still attack a large swath of territory. General Welch loved it. We were off and running.

A few weeks later, General Welch tasked me to develop a list of the most important issues we needed to be working. I focused on avenues for defeating the steadily growing capabilities of the Soviet Union through innovative tactics for applying airpower, gleaned from discussions with a host of action officers known for thinking out of the box. Welch signed on to the proposals, won General Jones’ approval, and decided to hire another officer to help with the expanded mandate. He gave me a name to consider, one he had kept in his hip pocket: Major Jim Weaver. That got my immediate attention – by an incredible stroke, General Welch had reached into a large bag of prospects and come up with my comrade-in-arms from Academy gymnastics days. I told General Welch to look no further – this was our man. I was delighted to hire Jim, who had compiled a terrific track record and whom I knew to be smart, eager and tenacious. Jim was equally astonished and happy to see me. We divided up the work program and set out to help General Welch get the Air Force’s strategic house in order.

We soon learned, however, that below the level of the Chief of Staff, General Jones, the Air Force was not enthusiastic about having our help. Although we had a direct line to the front office, those who viewed our efforts as an intrusion into their turf found ways to circumvent General Welch’s authority. The inherent staff bias against ad hoc initiatives was exacerbated by General Jones’ reputation for not trusting formal staff work and of resorting to trusted agents like General Welch to end-run the bureaucracy and its rigid protocols. Consequently, with rare exception, we got very little help from the three-star level on down in the Air Staff, and not much more from field organizations.

This bureaucratic stiff-arming blunted our efforts to reorient traditional Air Force thinking and operation, and the resulting frustration raised tensions in the office. The Chief wanted results, and we weren’t producing. Then salvation walked through our door in the form of Major Moody Suter, a scruffy, fearless action officer from the Operations side of XO, who worked in the dreary confines of the Pentagon’s underground level. That was a perfect setting for Moody, whose self-assigned mission in his present duties was to maneuver through the seams of the Air Staff and press his case for a visionary makeover of the way the Air Force trained its fighter pilots for combat. He called his
concept “Red Flag,” a brilliant handle for a program he wanted to establish at Nellis AFB, Nevada, home of the Air Force Fighter Weapons School – the Air Force’s “graduate school” for fighter pilots. It entailed a specialized fighter unit whose mission was first, to master Soviet aerial combat tactics, second, to refit an existing Air Force fighter to mimic Russian capabilities, and third, to teach the U.S. fighter community how best to engage its principal enemy. For months, Suter had hit one brick wall after another trying to sell his scheme. And then he found General Jasper Welch. It was love at first sight.

General Welch cleaned up Moody, polished his briefing a bit, and was off to see the Chief, who immediately signed off on the Red Flag construct. The next stop was Langley AFB and the mercurial General Bob Dixon, four-star commander of the Tactical Air Command, who would have to buy into and implement what would be a massive, expensive undertaking. To his credit, he did, creating a world-class operation that transformed Air Force fighter combat training. In my view, General Dixon also took too much credit for bringing to life Moody’s vision, which, in any event, won broad acclaim and made Suter a sort of cult hero – a relentless warrior who singlehandedly pushed airpower to a new dimension of capability.

Thus it was that Red Flag saved our bacon as “strategic innovators.” General Jones’ next revision to our charter took us off the hook permanently. It was triggered by the advent of the ritual spring Congressional hearings cycle, devoted to testimony on the federal budget, of which the lion’s share typically went to the Department of Defense and its principal agencies, the military services. This annual slog places heavy demands on the service staffs, which generate an inordinate amount of supporting documents to justify thousands of programs for budgets that collectively command hundreds of billions of dollars. Facing his first trip through a gauntlet of Congressional committees, General Jones had become highly dissatisfied with what he considered a haphazard process that produced a flood of disparate materials lacking in both organization and substance. No overarching themes, no meaningful priorities, nothing to describe how hundreds of programs and billions of dollars would be integrated to sustain and enhance the capabilities portrayed as essential to the Air Force mission and its national security roles. Worse, there was no standard, approved language justifying individual programs to ensure that the Congress heard a consistent story from a parade of witnesses, beginning with the Chief of Staff and the civilian service secretary.

The Chief told Welch to fix it. Welch told me to figure out how and get it done. He would run interference with the Air Staff and the field and handle the battles over substantive issues. My job was to devise and implement an
organizing concept that would guide and channel the efforts of hundreds of staff officers and their general-officer bosses in the Pentagon and across the Air Force.

My first stop was General Jones’ special assistant, Colonel Pete Todd, a Class of 1959 Academy grad who had served in Jones’ employ since the latter was a SAC two-star air division commander. The accident rate in the general’s division had grown alarmingly, prompting him to ask for comments from the field. Lieutenant Colonel Todd, a B-52 aircraft commander, responded to General Jones’ request so persuasively that the general hired him on the spot as a special assistant. Pete soon became his senior’s alter ego, the indispensable man with a golden pen who could perfectly translate Jones’ thinking into the written word. Pete was therefore an invaluable source for me on how the Chief wanted to deal with the Congressional hearings. After consulting him, I decided to divide the process into three phases: Preparation, Execution and Follow Up. The first required the creation of a set of crisp, standardized documents I called Fact Issue Papers, or FIPs, each of which would succinctly lay out the issue in question and the essence of the Air Force’s position. The second entailed creating a unique language, blending stenography and hieroglyphics, that distilled an hour’s worth of testimony onto a single-page summary. The third was an intense, private process whereby Pete and I edited the transcripts of the completed hearings and provided additional information requested “for the record.”

There were hundreds of FIPs on a staggering array of topics, from the highly technical to the daily routines of maintenance and logistics. Each had to be edited, checked for accuracy, and cross-referenced with associated material. It was a mammoth task, and I felt compelled to do it myself in order to ensure accuracy and consistency across all the inputs. I quickly learned to have the authors of the papers put their names and phone numbers at the bottom so I could talk to them directly about questions or edits. General Jones, too, liked the idea of going directly to the source, and he would frequently pick up the phone and call an AO directly, an almost unheard-of practice that made bosses up and down the Air Staff highly uncomfortable. I would also work with General Welch and Colonel Todd to arrange briefing sessions for the Chief on key issues, so he could probe the staff or issue guidance on how he wanted a particular matter handled by all of those testifying at the hearings.

Meanwhile, Pete was crafting the Chief’s opening statement before the major defense-related committees, a sort of Air Force State of the Union address, too long to be read during an actual hearing, but necessary to lay all
the key Air Force issues before Congress and the press. Typically, the witness would speak for ten to twenty minutes from a condensed version, then submit the longer text for the record. General Jones wanted a more personal version of the condensed statement, one that would give him the flexibility to speak on any issue in the full statement, all on one piece of paper on the table in front of him. I worked with Pete for weeks to design that piece of paper, with frequent inputs from General Jones. It was extraordinarily creative. For example, we used a small arrow that could mean, depending upon the angle at which it was printed, any one of eight separate adjectives. The final paper filled a legal page, top-to-bottom and side-to-side, with no margins.

The hearings phase was equally tortuous, sitting behind the Chief, listening to hours of testimony, recording unanticipated questions to prepare future witnesses, noting particularly effective answers to improve the preparatory material, and updating the Chief’s one-pager. Because of the extended hearings season, the follow-up phase for the first round of hearings began while we were still preparing for and executing the remaining sessions. A few days after each hearing concluded, that committee’s staff provided us a verbatim text, which had to be edited and returned under a tight deadline. These raw documents usually ran to hundreds of pages, and some of the material was almost unintelligible, given the propensity of committee members to pause, backtrack, forget their train of thought, and interrupt one another. The Chief’s responses were often similarly difficult to follow, as he articulated various responses on the fly. The object was to produce a smooth version of his replies without playing too fast and loose with what had actually been said during the hearing.

Of course, achieving historical accuracy regarding the conduct of any hearing was already completely out of the question, because any member was free to submit Inserts for the Record. These lists of questions were entered into the hearing record, thus creating the impression that the member had actually been present. Similarly, members who had been present often submitted additional questions, to elicit responses on matters not addressed during the hearing. Pete and I either wrote the answers to these questions ourselves or passed them to the staff and edited what we got back. Pete was the final authority on which answers went straight back to the Hill and which ones first needed the Chief’s approval. Without this relationship of trust with General Jones, our task would have been nigh impossible. As it was, through the entire spring of 1975, I spent eighteen-hour days, seven days a week coping with the tidal wave of work attendant to that year’s annual hearings cycle. When it was finally over, I badly needed a break, but the Chief had another brainstorm.
Welch broke the news in his usual laconic fashion. We were going to revisit the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact’s military threat in Europe.

The only happy note in the midst of this forced march through the hearings season was pinning on lieutenant colonel leaves in May. The ceremony was conducted by the Deputy XO, Major General Foster Lee Smith, known among AOs as Foster Lee Wordsmith for his frivolous editing of every paper put in front of him, necessitating hours of needless work. If nothing else, the event meant that Dorene and I, and the kids, got to see each other in daylight.

General Welch got our new charter in early May. It was a product of classic “out of the box” thinking. General Jones had concluded that focusing exclusively on Soviet strengths to guide U.S. force development and battlefield tactics was shortsighted, particularly with regard to Europe, where the Chief had garnered considerable experience. He wanted to rotate the analytic prism a half-turn, that is, to assess the problems and challenges inherent in a Soviet-conceived Warsaw Pact war plan that depended on massive movement of troops and equipment, plus logistics support, over long distances, in a complex air and ground attack sequence whose outcome depended crucially upon achieving initial success. The Chief’s goal was to divine vulnerabilities and weaknesses that could be exploited by precise, timely NATO strikes and trigger catastrophic breakdowns in Warsaw Pact attack timing. It struck me as a very common-sense initiative. The Air Force intelligence community – now led by the self-same General George Keegan who had provided “happy snaps” to General Brown in Vietnam – thought that it was a lunatic idea. Our job was to convince them otherwise, get them into harness to spend a huge amount of time and effort at the expense of their traditional tasks, and guide them through an entirely new way of looking at our prime adversary, whom they thought with great certainty that they already knew – thoroughly. General Welch told me to come up with a game plan and get things moving. My OEP experience with the Wage and Price Freeze was about to come in very handy. This was a huge challenge, one that would span myriad organizations inside and outside of the Air Force, and well beyond the walls of the Pentagon. I was about to enter the world of intelligence on a scale and at a level of detail that greatly exceeded my previous exposure. It introduced me to analysts, processes, and mindsets that were at once highly impressive and deeply unsettling, an education that I would draw upon for the next twenty years.

We called our enterprise the Net Assessment Task Force, or NATF, charged to weight NATO strengths against Warsaw Pact weaknesses. As I was no expert on either subject, I began a crash course in both. The first challenge was to structure the study, which meant first understanding the two adversaries’
military capabilities across strategy, tactics, intelligence, war planning, training, hardware, logistics, and maintenance. At the same time, I was reaching out to the intelligence community, using a letter of introduction signed by General Welch that explained our task and our authority to conduct it. I gradually assembled a roster of experts in each aspect of the assessment and then set about getting those experts detailed to XOS for the duration of the study.

With a full complement of people in place, the next challenge was to get the analysts motivated to think about weaknesses rather than strengths. That often meant prodding the community to gather new data and assess the implications from the perspective of capitalizing on vulnerability rather than overcoming advantage, at a time when, as we came to realize, the Soviets had significantly altered their approach to a major NATO-Warsaw Pact war in the middle of Europe. Here again, good fortune intervened, in the form of Major Ted Warner, my former colleague from the Poly Sci Department at the Air Force Academy. Ted had recently completed a stint with the analysts of Soviet military matters at the CIA and was beginning Russian language training in Monterey in preparation for a tour as an assistant air attaché in Moscow. Through the Poly Sci grapevine, he had heard of our new endeavor and volunteered to return to Washington to help. We accepted his offer, and back he came, eager to educate us about the nature of the Soviets’ new doctrine for theater warfare in Europe.

Drawing upon his recent work at CIA and contacts in the broader Intelligence Community, Ted pulled together a masterful briefing that captured key aspects of the revised Soviet thinking about how to attack NATO. It laid out the Warsaw Pact battle plan as understood by analysts who had been studying the subject for years and then introduced new elements from Ted’s recent research. Of these, the most important departure was his assessment that the Soviet-drafted battle plan now envisioned a full-scale, theater-wide offensive fought at the outset solely with conventional weapons, but with the constant threat, across the entire battlefield, of escalation to large-scale nuclear strikes by both sides. This was a dramatic change from Soviet and NATO thinking over the previous two decades, during which both sides had assumed that any major war in Europe would almost certainly involve immediate, massive nuclear strikes.

Warner’s briefing, subsequently refined and expanded, portrayed the opening Soviet “air operation,” involving hundreds of fighters, fighter-bombers and theater-range bombers, including the Backfire, blowing holes in NATO’s forward air defense belt and then conducting massed conventional attacks on critical targets located deep in NATO’s rear area – major air bases, key command
posts, and nuclear weapon storage sites. This massive air assault was to launch simultaneously with the opening of a two-wave ground offensive carried out by armor-heavy Soviet divisions supported by heavy artillery fires. The first-echelon Warsaw Pact forces were tasked to create breakthroughs in NATO’s forward ground defenses. These gaps were to be immediately exploited by highly-mobile second-echelon forces, tasked in turn to bypass failure, reinforce success, and drive deep into NATO territory. To the central point of the NATF charter, the briefing illuminated many vulnerabilities in this Soviet-led campaign, to wit, the gauge-change of rail lines at the Russian-Polish border that would compel a massive, time-consuming unloading and reloading operation and create a prime target for NATO forces.

The briefing was very persuasive and had a transformative impact on intelligence community thinking. The revised attack and the supporting analyses contained a great deal of valuable material. All of it now needed to be recorded and buttressed with follow-on tasks for both the intelligence and the operational communities. The essence of our work had been to spur U.S. and NATO war planners to focus on Warsaw Pact vulnerabilities, as well as strengths, and devise a new strategy accordingly. Creating a report that would drive this outcome fell to me, as the executive director of the NATF. It was challenging, tedious work: illuminating the significant chinks we had identified in the armor of the Soviet-led juggernaut and identifying plausible paths to exploit them. I closeted myself for a week and produced a voluminous report, with a summary and multiple attachments containing the analytical work essential to win credibility with analysts, war planners and operators.

General Welch was well rewarded for his year’s work; he was selected for promotion to major general and assigned to head the Air Force Office of Studies and Analysis, where he had served some years before under Brigadier General Glenn Kent, its founding director. He asked me if I wanted to move with him, but I had had enough of the analytical world. That made me a free agent – but not for long. I was about to fall into the clutches of Colonel Harry Bendorf, who ran XOXS, the “S” short for “Strategy.” Fondly known as the “Skunk Works,” it was home to the protectors of the Air Force’s most cherished truths, shock troops in the relentless interservice battles over strategy and resources.

I had hoped for some time off to clear my head, recharge my batteries, and reconnect with my family. It was not to be. The move to XOXS lodged me among some of the Air Force’s best and brightest. A notorious sweat shop, XOXS had attracted a succession of high-caliber talent, because the work was on the front lines of policy, and the rewards – rapid promotion and fast-track
career management – were legendary. Happily, this stellar group included two good friends, my classmate Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Stebbins and former Poly Sci colleague Lieutenant Colonel Barry Horton, both of them now seasoned veterans in putting forward the Air Force case in the Pentagon’s bureaucratic wars. I had another steep learning curve to climb, encompassing joint service planning, programming, and budgetary interaction that spanned a vast domain, ranging far beyond the arcane Holy Wars of arms control with which I was most familiar.

XOXS provided one adventure after another, from the historic to the comic. Barry Horton was a force of nature, capable of prodigious amounts of work, legendary for the two briefcases bulging with papers he carried as he rushed to and fro about the building. He once transformed his cubicle into a “leave simulator,” wearing a Hawaiian shirt to the office and listening to hula music as he labored away from dawn until late in the evening, all the while signed out on leave. Charlie Stebbins’ work habits were equally promethean. It was not unusual for his wife, Sarah, to drive their motor home to the Pentagon parking lot, where they spent the night, to save him a few precious hours that would otherwise be lost to transit. I was soon caught up in the frenetic pace. Once, as Charlie and I were reproducing highly classified papers at 2:00 a.m., we discovered to our horror that a top-secret image had been permanently burned onto the drum of a large and expensive Xerox copying machine. Not knowing what else to do, we disassembled the machine, removed the drum, and stored it in our secured office for safekeeping, precipitating panic a couple of hours later when the keeper of the copy room arrived at his post.

The most memorable task I was given during this period was completely off the wall. In early December, 1975, I was sent to SAC Headquarters at Offutt AFB in Nebraska, to serve as recorder for a “Defense Symposium” hosted by General Russell Dougherty, SAC’s commander. The symposium brought together a crowd of conservative luminaries, in and out of government – thirty senior officers, ambassadors, notable strategists – ostensibly to develop a “product” benefitting the services and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The focus was what they perceived to be a concerted Soviet drive to overtake and surpass the United States militarily, as a prelude to a renewed march toward world domination. For two days, a parade of speakers and briefers strode to the podium, cataloging Soviet advances across a broad spectrum of military capabilities, and portraying in highly alarmist terms an asserted erosion in U.S. advantage. The featured bearer of ill tidings was none other than George Keegan, the two-star general heading Air Force Intelligence.

At the conclusion of this covert conclave, a mandate was drawn up calling
for a nationwide campaign to alert the public, thereby marshaling a groundswell of support for rebuilding America’s defenses. I have the sense that this was the genesis of the 1976 revival of the Committee on the Present Danger, which had been born in the 1950s to win support for Paul Nitze’s NSC-68 policy paper on countering the Soviet threat. That reincarnation failed in its goal to get Gerald Ford reelected but was later very successful. Its supporters funded speeches, lobbied the Congress, wrote Op-Ed pieces, and churned out a steady stream of articles that set the stage for the Reagan presidency and its massive military buildup. Once again, I found myself very discomfited by what struck me as an overtly political initiative given birth at the nation’s premiere military organization, the Strategic Air Command.

I had kept meticulous notes, which I was admonished by the meeting organizers to keep strictly to myself, understandable orders considering the highly sensitive nature of the meeting. It also forced me to butt heads with the new boss of XOX, Major General Dick Lawson, who had recently moved to that position after a stint in the White House. He was a consummate actor, superbly skilled in the Washington power games, and a man on the rise, having come up through the ranks of SAC. He had selected me to attend the meeting and act as scribe, but had not attended himself; now he called me to his office, wanting to see my notes. Having given my word to keep them to myself, I demurred, to General Lawson’s astonishment and chagrin. Given his role as my OER-endorsing official, this wasn’t the smartest move in the world, but for me it was a matter not only of personal integrity, but also of protecting myself from being accused of leaking the proceedings of a meeting that to my mind should never have taken place where it did.

I had been in XOXs just long enough to meet the minimum tenure to require an OER when yet another bolt-from-the-blue phone call came, this time from Brigadier General John Pustay. He advised me that he had been tapped by General Jones to make permanent the ad hoc budget hearings process that General Welch and I had created the year before and to run the show for the 1976 hearings season. He had been given his pick of people to man the new organization, and I was to be his number-one guy. That was the last thing in the world I wanted to hear. I was just getting comfortable in Colonel Bendorf’s shop, which was a real powerhouse. I hated the hours but was intrigued by the agenda and had won the respect of my superb colleagues. Being thrown back into the hearings grind was a dismal prospect, especially with a new boss about whom I knew very little. As it turned out, I would get to know him all too well. He became in short order both a powerful mentor and a difficult overseer.

Brigadier General Pustay was a Naval Academy grad who had opted for the
Air Force and became an intelligence specialist. Extremely bright, energetic and ambitious, he rose rapidly through the ranks, garnered a doctoral degree along the way, and joined the Air Force Academy Political Science faculty in the spring of 1960, my junior year. I was in one of his graduate seminars, and he had written a highly laudatory letter recommending me for a White House Fellowship, a prestigious post he had once enjoyed. He had a sparkling smile and a quick laugh that belied the tension driving his Type A personality. From my perspective, he was not the best choice for the hearings responsibility, where, to keep the massive paper flow moving, I knew I would need maximum latitude with minimal oversight.

General Pustay did rely on my experience to get a formal organization up and running. I proposed the name Air Force Budget Issues Team, or AFBIT, and put Colonel Pete Todd and myself at the heart of it. We hired a secretary and an admin clerk, found an office, and I brought on board a talented young major named Denny Stiles to help with the writing chores. I also created a series of standardized products, beginning with the Fact Issue Papers (FIPs) that had been the core of the previous year’s process, supplemented by Summary Issue Papers (SIPs) that boiled the more lengthy FIPs down to one page, and Policy Statements, designed to ensure a consistent message on a given matter was heard from a host of Air Force witnesses over the course of dozens of hearings. These sets of papers, some of which were classified, were collected in three-ring binders with spiffy covers and distributed to key participants throughout the Air Force. This meant the papers also had to be cleared, updated, and controlled – all of which greatly magnified an already burdensome task.

My labors were not made easier by General Pustay’s annoying resort to communicating through little personal notes conveying either indignant chiding (“What were you thinking!”), or effusive praise (“Attaboy!”), sometimes with a squared or cubed annotation. I finally confronted him over one such critical note I considered way off the mark, and he quickly backpedaled, insisting that the issue was of little consequence to begin with. I finally decided to just smile through my tears and focus on the mission, dreading what lay ahead. The long and short of it was that AFBIT II was twice the drudgery of the first time through. Pete Todd, however, was again invaluable and General Pustay did well in metering the flow to the Chief, who was pleased with the process. On the April day we wound things down, I signed out on leave and went home to fetch Dorene for lunch. As we were walking out the door, the phone rang. It was General Pustay. He needed me, now. We had a new job.

I was devastated, as was Dorene. I had been in the fire-brigade mode now for over two years, drinking from the hose, dodging flames, and rescuing issues

– and bosses – in distress. When I reported to General Pustay’s office that afternoon, he didn’t seem any happier than I was, but he tried to be chipper as he outlined the task he’d been given by General Jones. The Chief’s pet program, a high-technology platform known as the Airborne Warning and Control System, or AWACS (pronounced “a-wax”), was in a world of trouble. Essentially a flying radar antenna mounted atop a Boeing 707 airframe, it could discriminate flying objects against the background clutter of the earth’s surface. In short, it was an electronic marvel. It was also hugely expensive and plagued by development problems, and it had not captured the imagination of anyone but General Jones. The program lacked a major-command sponsor and a coherent military rationale that expressed in lay terms its potential contribution to what later became known as Air-Land Battle, or combined arms warfare. Convincing the Air Force at large, the other services, and most especially the Congress to swallow the costs of a thirty-plus AWACS fleet was a steep hill to climb. More like Mount Everest. That, in a nutshell, was our job. As the special assistant to the director of the AWACS Task Force, that is, to Brigadier General John Pustay, my job was to build a strategy that would get the technical problems fixed, describe the mission in compelling terms, and win a constituency for it across all of the commands and agencies required to field this new capability. And so, while General Pustay set about meeting the key players and putting our team together, I closeted myself to master the issues and design a game plan that would integrate the thinking and efforts of thousands of people.

Once again, I started with Colonel Pete Todd, who proved once more that he lived inside the Chief’s brain. He gave me invaluable background on the origin of the AWACS, how it related to General Jones’ service in Europe and the challenge of managing a putative NATO-Warsaw Pact war that encompassed thousands of moving parts, from tanks to ships to aircraft, across a huge geographical expanse. Jones saw the AWACS as a critical new capability, one that would provide the field commander a priceless advantage: “battle space awareness,” i.e., knowing at any moment the disposition and actions of enemy forces, allowing optimum application of his own assets. The more I learned and thought about the problem, the more I became convinced of the Chief’s vision and the necessity to acquire the AWACS. This was a truly revolutionary advance in the art of war, one that would multiply the effectiveness not just of American and allied air power, but ground and naval forces as well.

It took me a couple of weeks to get my thoughts straight and to build a presentation of how I envisioned applying the talents of the task force to advance the cause of the AWACS. I told General Pustay I needed a three-hour block of time with him, the team he was assembling, and a handful of key outsiders
whose support would be essential to our success. When the day came, I assembled my audience in a large room, across the front of which I had arrayed side-by-side eight portable blackboards. Each panel was titled with a particular dimension of our challenge, beginning with “The Conceptual AWACS” and continuing through other aspects, such as “The Technological AWACS,” “The Manufactured AWACS,” “The Tactical AWACS,” “The Congressional AWACS,” and so forth. Each of these was broken down into a statement of objectives, challenges, tasks and responsibilities. The presentation was a tour de force. General Pustay gave it his imprimatur, directing me to brief the sprawling community who would be responsible for achieving the long list of objectives. That dominated my agenda for the next several months, an effort eased by tangible results: I could sense growing confidence and enthusiasm surrounding a program battling for life, with the bonus of having my horizons expanded into the worlds of research, development, and acquisition. I was also privileged to work with a host of talented officers, most particularly, Colonel Charlie McDonald, a superb officer with prodigious stamina, destined for 4 stars, with whom I would serve often as our careers progressed. I also found a remarkable young man with a splendid name, Emilio Tavernise, an Italian immigrant and Renaissance Man who wrote with a flowing pen. The downside was that the long hours, arduous work, and General Pustay’s demanding style were eroding my health and morale. Even so, the two of us grew closer, and I came to better understand the price of his meteoric rise. I was deeply affected by his struggle to balance his work ethic with his role as husband and father – a cautionary tale that I should have better assimilated.

As 1976 ground toward December, we had made progress across all aspects of the task force’s strategic plan. For the first time in two years, I could enjoy the prospect of seeing a long-term effort through to conclusion, ending the run of back-to-back ad hoc fire fights that had defined my Pentagon tour to date. AWACS was now a viable program with significant promise. I was proud to be part of the team that would surely bring it to fruition, and despite the hours, became more upbeat. I even made a modest improvement in my health by running the outer ring of the Pentagon every evening, in uniform, wearing military shoes, thereby becoming legendary with the janitorial staff. And then General Pustay shattered my comfort zone with a late Friday phone call. Time to shift gears, he said. Time to crank up the Air Force Budget Issues Team.

My reaction was a measure of my devotion to the AWACS Task Force. I was shocked – and furious – with General Pustay. What I felt was a cavalier summons, with the presumption that I was at his beck and call – and worse, with not a word about the fate of the task force – pushed all of my buttons. His
insensitivity to my wishes triggered an emotional tsunami. I went home for the weekend in turmoil, determined to confront General Pustay over my strong desire to remain with the AWACS Task Force. Dorene listened sympathetically – and then called John Sullivan at his ROTC teaching post at the Virginia Military Institute, a few hours south of Arlington. He drove up immediately, sat me down, and laid out his usual rational take on my circumstances: I had borne heavier crosses than this, General Pustay obviously needed me, his written endorsement at the end of AFBIT II had been unstinting in its praise, and at least there would be no learning curve to climb. Moreover, the AWACS program now had legs, and I could track or perhaps even boost its progress during the hearings by crafting supportive language for those testifying. Surely, if I kept my cool and remained the loyal soldier, that loyalty would be returned. And so, after a long, miserable weekend, I reported dutifully on Monday morning and began my third trip through the budget hearings wringer. It was, of course, the right decision. Within the month, both General Pustay and I were promoted. The Chief promoted him to two stars and I was on the colonel promotion list published in January 1977 as a BTZ (below the zone) selectee. In later years, I came to better appreciate the pressure General Pustay felt, his preoccupation with work, his unrelenting quest for excellence, and his loyalty to me. Two years hence, I would find myself in very much the same situation into which he had been thrust so precipitously.

And that, dear reader, brings us to the most momentous decision of my career, one that put me as far outside my hard-won skills as I had ever been – and set the stage for the remainder of my life. It came thirty-five months into my unlikely, unfocused, unpredictable, and gut-wrenching Pentagon tour, as the dark clouds of relentless labor lifted, and a bright vista of normality emerged. General Pustay was tasked to organize a new entity in XO, the Directorate of Concepts, XOC, with responsibility to help shape the future of the Air Force. I became a division chief, running Joint and Congressional Matters, and heading up AFBIT, this time autonomously, as General Pustay was absorbed in putting his organization together. My division was stocked with talented officers and ran like clockwork, allowing me the latitude to explore other struggling programs like the ill-fated B-1A bomber and the M-X intercontinental ballistic missile, which had come under heavy fire in President Carter’s Administration. The phone call I had been anticipating since the day my promotion was announced came soon thereafter, from Colonel Sam McClure, who headed the Colonels Assignment Branch in Air Force Personnel. “Lee, I want you to think about where you’d like to go next and then come see me.” Unsaid, but obvious to me, he had a major challenge in getting me reassigned, one that had been
building for years, since I left Air Training Command to be an Olmsted Scholar in 1964. I had no major-command identity, and for eight of my sixteen plus years of service, I had been in a classroom. Now, as a six-year early selectee to colonel, I was going to be a very hard sell to the operational Air Force. Worse, I now made McClure’s problem almost impossible. My mind had long been made up, harkening back to the early days of my Air Staff tour. I wanted to go to the Strategic Air Command.

When I dropped this bombshell during my face-to-face session with Colonel McClure, he was even more than unsympathetic. He said bluntly that my request was a non-starter; he was not about to call SAC to even discuss the possibility – at least not without some prior heavy-duty interference. Not to worry, I told him; please be patient, reinforcements are on the way. I did not mention that I had just received a congratulatory note from General Brown, telling me to be sure to let him know if I needed assistance. I didn’t hesitate to ask, and he was more than sympathetic – he immediately penned a note to his colleague, General Russell Dougherty, the Commander-in-Chief of SAC (CINCSAC). Within a week, Colonel McClure called to tell me to get on an airplane to Offutt Air Force Base, just outside Omaha, Nebraska. I had an appointment with the four-star boss of the outfit I wanted desperately to call home.

SAC Headquarters is an imposing building, dominating the skyline from its elevated location overlooking the southern third of the base. With its tightly-controlled entrances, the sand-colored brick structure radiates a seriousness fully in keeping with the apocalyptic mission of the command: deter nuclear attack, or failing that, visit utter devastation on an attacker. That all-or-literal-ly-nothing duality was perfectly reflected in the juxtaposed olive branch and lightning bolt clutched by the mailed fist at the center of the SAC crest. By contrast, the command motto, “Peace is Our Profession,” put the focus squarely on deterrence, belying the thousands of targets in the nuclear war plan and SAC’s readiness to strike them on a moment’s notice with ICBMs and bombers. This was the most daunting military force ever assembled, one that enjoyed a unique status in the Air Force, the Department of Defense, and indeed, in the world. While the Soviet Union also had an imposing strategic nuclear arsenal, fully capable of destroying the United States as a viable nation, the accuracy of its weapons, the reliability of its delivery systems, and the professionalism of its people never approached those of its strategic nuclear adversary. SAC was an elite force: mistakes were not tolerated; excellence was well rewarded. Indeed, the command had the singular privilege of promoting on its own authority crew members who attained a specified level of proficiency. Most telling, its senior officers had dominated the upper echelons of the Air Force for
the first thirty years of its existence as an independent service.

As I made my way through the visitors’ gate and was greeted at the lobby door by my escort, the import of my decision to seek entry into the SAC’s ranks as a colonel-select came crashing home. Other than what I had absorbed anecdotally in the classroom and in the halls of the Pentagon, I really knew very little about the organization. My most memorable introduction to the mission had come on a T-33 cross-country mission to a mid-western SAC base while I was an instructor pilot at Craig AFB. Just as my student and I were leaving Base Operations for our return trip, the peaceful afternoon was shattered by the shriek of a klaxon, and suddenly all hell broke loose. Pickup trucks came flying from every corner of the flight line, crew chiefs were sprinting across the tarmac, air crews poured out of their vehicles and into the dozens of B-47s and KC-135 tankers that filled the immense parking ramp. Hundreds of engines wound to life in a deafening crescendo. As checklists were completed, the sea of aircraft began migrating toward the runway at breakneck speed with perilously-close spacing. I was witnessing a no-notice alert exercise, although the crews would not know until the execution message was decoded during taxi whether this was a drill or the real thing. It was a spectacle unlike anything I had ever seen or imagined, and it made a lasting impression. I remember thinking at the time that this was not something I would ever want to do. Clearly, that reluctance was now moot. Guided by some blend of instinct and sober calculation, I was about to launch my career onto a trajectory whose end point was by no means certain.

When I was ushered into General Dougherty’s office, the first thing that caught my eye was the name plate on his desk. It did not carry his name; rather, it read, “There is nothing in my job description that requires me to be a son of a bitch.” While that was heartening, his first words were sobering: “Lee Butler, what makes you think you are good enough to come to Strategic Air Command?” That was a question I had thought about a great deal and was quite prepared to answer. “General Dougherty, I don’t know if I am good enough to be in SAC, but in my career to date I have embarked on and succeeded in many other demanding responsibilities. I want to make a difference in the Air Force at whatever level I am privileged to serve. I have learned and contributed across a wide variety of missions and staff jobs, but until I know the strategic business, my education and my potential will not be complete. I have saved the best for last.”

My reply was sincere and heartfelt, and it hit home. Obviously, General Dougherty had already studied my record, and General Brown’s personal recommendation carried an enormous amount of weight. Presuming I didn’t
stumble in the interview, CINCSAC was prepared to hire me and, in fact, he already had my assignment in his pocket. After a few pleasantries, he said, “Lee, I’m sending you to Rome and the Mohawk Valley, where you can cut your teeth on the core of what we do. Give my regards to General Brown.”

I was elated but geographically challenged. I knew where Rome was and where the Mohawk Valley was, but to my knowledge they were not in the same place – indeed, not on the same continent. I asked the general’s exec to elaborate on the CINC’s comment, to which he dryly replied, “He’s sending you to the 416th Bomb Wing at Griffiss Air Force Base just outside Rome, New York. You’ll be assigned as the assistant deputy commander for operations (DCO). Your orders will be down shortly. Plan on going to Castle Air Force Base in California for B-52 training in June.” The die was cast – one more breathless leap without harness or safety net.

Dorene and I decided to visit Griffiss AFB unannounced, over the Easter holidays. Not knowing what we were getting into, we wanted to take the edge off the anxiety of such a dramatic new course by at least getting a leg up on our home-to-be six months down the road. So we piled into the car and made the long day’s drive from Arlington, arriving in Rome around nightfall, an hour that only deepened the gloom of a down-at-the-heels city caught in the twin grips of winter and an economic depression. We checked into the Visiting Officers Quarters, got a bite to eat at the officers’ club a short walk away, and spent a restless night wondering what the daylight of an Easter Sunday would bring. We were pleasantly surprised to see a base that, although piled high with snow, had an attractive chapel, decent housing, and a full complement of family support functions. Griffiss was also home to two large tenant organizations, an Air Defense Command air division with an associated squadron of F-102 fighter-interceptors, and a Research and Development Center belonging to the Air Force Systems Command, each headed by a one-star general. It was a busy and populous base, one we left feeling much more at ease. That would soon change.

A final comment or two about our social life, such as it was, which revolved around my job and my Academy classmates, a large contingent of whom lived in the D.C. area. General and Mrs. Brown were kind to invite Dorene and me to formal dinners at their magnificent quarters located on Fort Myer, overlooking the Potomac and the line of monuments beginning at the Memorial Bridge. We were always very junior but always made to feel comfortable. Dorene’s favorite among these events was a dinner honoring Admiral John S. McCain, Sr., former commander of the U.S. Pacific forces, whose son, Captain John McCain, was a Navy pilot who had been a prisoner of the North Vietnamese for nearly five and
a half years. She was seated at the admiral’s right, and they hit it off wonder-
fully well. He was moved by her discreet inquiry as to his son’s well-being, a tear
coming to his eye as he recounted the brutal treatment John, Jr., had endured.
Happily, he did not remember me from across the tennis net in Vietnam.

Dorene found a fulfilling role with the Bolling AFB Officers Wives Club
(OWC), whose members included a number of spouses whose husbands I
worked with and for in the Pentagon. She was also joyfully reunited with her
Air Force soul sister, Lilette Steeves, the wife of my colleague Dick Steeves,
whom we had met at Armed Forces Staff College. Dorene served the OWC in a
variety of roles, from decorations chairman for the annual Charity Ball, to the
demanding position of program chairman, at the “request” of Peg Ellis, wife of
the then Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, General Richard Ellis, who would follow
General Dougherty as CINCSAC. More to come on that score.

Dorene’s slate of speakers was unique in the history of the OWC, if only
because she prevailed on Bob Hope to make his magic for the ladies. It took
the both of us to manage the logistics of his visit, arranging lodging at his fa-
vorite hotel, hiring a limo, and accounting for every minute of his stay. Things
started badly, when he arrived at a Dulles Airport gate different than the one
we had been told by his staff. We spent a frantic few minutes chasing him
down, and he was a bit miffed when we finally spotted him. However, the limo
ride, complete with champagne, calmed him, and Bob invited us to his hotel
room for a drink. Still not ready to retire, he plucked a 7-iron from his ever-
present golf bag and we struck out on an evening walk. He was a predictable
hit the next day, as was the gift Dorene had concocted, drawing on a book
about Hope’s many years visiting American military forces stationed abroad.
One of its themes harped on the ubiquitous box lunches, a staple of his diet
during long flights and voyages, or while roughing it in the field. Seizing on this
anecdote, Dorene procured a box lunch from the Bolling AFB mess hall, and
had it bronzed, to include an empty milk carton, plastic utensils, and a partially
consumed chicken leg. Her guest was delighted, speechless really, no doubt a
first for him. His face glowed as Dorene embraced him after the presentation.

Dorene equally relished her service as an “Arlington Lady,” a role created
in 1948 by Gladys Vandenberg, wife of the second Air Force Chief of Staff,
after watching services for deceased airmen at Arlington National Cemetery
attended only by a chaplain and a military honor guard. Drawing on members
of the Officers Wives Club, she organized a group of volunteers to act as surro-
gate family members, lending a more intimate note to the time-honored burial
ceremony. Dorene also served as a room mother for Brett and Lisa in each of
their three school years, during which they had thrived. They had swum on
the community team, taken up the trumpet and flute respectively, and were both honor students. I played precious little part in their lives and accomplishments, my most notable act being a decision to convert to Catholicism to honor Dorene’s deeply held faith and participate more fully in our commitment to raise our children in the Catholic faith. I took the required instruction from Deacon Sam Taub, a retired Army colonel with whom I made a strong bond. He was the perfect facilitator for my transition from the stark customs of the Church of Christ to the more elaborate rituals of Catholicism. Soon thereafter, I had the joy of taking my First Communion with our daughter, stunningly beautiful as she stood by my side at the altar.

The essence of this three-year stint in bureaucratic purgatory was that it played a pivotal role in my professional life but greatly inhibited my growth as a husband and a father. I became a highly skilled Action Officer, was well versed in the ironclad rituals and recurring rhythms of the building, serving with and for a host of contemporaries and seniors who would help shape my career time and again in the years ahead. Conversely, I felt that I was a burden for Dorene and that I did not know my children well, having spent precious little time on my family’s account, something I was determined to remedy during the assignment to Griffiss AFB. But first, we had to grit our collective teeth and endure another four months of separation, while I learned to fly the B-52 at Castle AFB in California, SAC’s premier aircrew training facility. That was a far greater challenge than any aircraft checkout program I had previously attempted. It was also a rude introduction to my new command.
Chapter 16

Bomber Pilot (1977 – 1979)

I left for Castle AFB in early June, 1977, driving the now eight-year-old Camaro and leaving Dorene to manage the move alone when the school year ended. We had joined the ranks of two-car families in the spring with the purchase of a 1977 Chevrolet Impala, a spacious, practical vehicle that would see long and honorable service before meeting an untimely end. With the decision to spend the summer with her folks in Hemet, Dorene and the children gave it a cross-country test. The 9th Street house in Arlington, which had served two generations of Butlers, went on the market and was quickly sold. Sad to say, the last hours there were filled with unwelcome drama: a motley crew of untrained movers showed up on a rickety bus and proceeded to paw through our belongings. A fistfight broke out on the front lawn, where most of our furniture by then sat with rain threatening. The driver of the moving truck fled the scene, whereupon the packers put things back in the house and then left.

Dorene dialed the Department of Defense moving agency to no avail, as their phones were constantly busy. So she drove to their office, finding a large room filled with feckless bureaucrats sitting around with their phones off the hook. Furious, she stormed past a startled secretary to confront the colonel who pretended to run the operation. After listening to her story, he disdainfully picked up a folder from his desk and said, “If you want to hear a really sad case, this is the file of an Army three-star whose entire household goods shipment to his overseas location has been lost. And, oh by the way, we can’t get you more movers for at least two weeks.” Now outraged, Dorene said, “You shouldn’t be concerned about rank, just service, but that clearly doesn’t matter around here.” She turned on her heel and returned home, where she received a fortuitous phone call from General Brown’s wife, Skip, extending a lunch invitation and checking on the move. On learning of the mover debacle, she called in the heavy artillery. General Brown was shortly on the line to advise that help was forthcoming. Indeed. The two-star head of Air Force transportation had a new crew on our doorstep forthwith and they got the job
done properly. Exhausted, Dorene gathered herself, bundled up Brett and Lisa, and, after a morale-lifting meal with the Browns at their home on the historic Fort Myer Army post, set out for California.

I arrived at Castle after an uneventful trip to find yet another World War II base, but one in reasonably good repair. Located just outside Merced, California, its setting was unimpressive, not quite desert but mostly scrub vegetation, with very hot summer days and moderate evenings. I moved into the Bachelor Officers Quarters, which were fairly typical – bedroom and bath, plus a sitting area with a small kitchen. By now I was well acquainted with the student pilot drill, having checked out in nine separate aircraft going back to my cadet days. And yet, none of that experience quite prepared me for what the B-52 held in store. The closest parallel was the C-141, which was certainly large and typically required five or six crew members, but beyond that all comparisons stop. Cargo haulers are about logistics, a vital but supporting mission, whereas the B-52, nicknamed the Stratofortress, is a weapons system, an instrument of war, the most versatile and lethal ever conceived. Originally designed to carry nuclear bombs, it has continuously evolved over the past fifty years, and today’s model, the B-52H, can deliver the widest array of weapons of any plane ever built. Although less than a hundred remain of the 744 produced by Boeing Aircraft Company from 1954 to 1962, their life expectancy is still measured in decades. Powered by eight Pratt & Whitney engines collectively delivering 135,000 pounds of thrust at maximum rating, a fully loaded BUFF, as it is more vulgarly but affectionately known (check Wikipedia), weighs nearly a half-million pounds at takeoff, with an unrefueled range of 8,800 miles. With air refueling, its reach is limited only by crew endurance, which in my case left a whole lot to be desired.

Despite my late-night jogs through the halls of the Pentagon, I arrived at Castle in terrible physical condition. Fortunately, academics consumed the first two months of the five-month program, giving me a window to rebuild the strength and stamina essential to coping with the long, arduous training missions to come. For openers, I would be wearing a helmet, and they had been little improved from my F-4 days. It was still uncomfortably heavy, developed annoying hot spots, and seemed far more bothersome than it had ten years earlier. Knowing that I would have it on for hours on end once I began the flying phase, I wore the damn thing every evening, for increasing periods, while doing my voluminous homework. The academics were far more demanding than I had anticipated. When I walked into the classroom the first day, I was greeted by a stack of material several feet high. The pilot’s checklist alone was daunting, running to dozens of pages, with a long Emergency
Procedures Section, much of which had to be memorized. Despite the B-52’s durability, there were many ways a flight aboard this lumbering giant could go deadly wrong.

This library of knowledge was only the tip of the iceberg. Ahead lay the unfamiliar task of mastering the massive, complex set of rules and procedures that govern the world of nuclear weapons in all its dimensions, from safety and security, to command, control, communications and weapons delivery. This was extremely serious business involving a hugely expensive aircraft, the welfare of its crew, hideously destructive weapons, and a flying mission more demanding than any other in aviation history. My particular challenge was coming into this universe not like the vast majority of my classmates – neophyte lieutenants fresh out of pilot training – but as a colonel-selectee soon to be thrust into a key leadership role. My staff and crews at Griffiss AFB would be far more experienced, not likely to be sympathetic to a fair-haired boy who had not paid his dues in SAC, where, according to a cynical homily popular among the troops, the reward for doing well is no punishment. As I soon learned, that rule was not inviolate.

Being much the senior member of my class, I was appointed the class commander, my duties mostly concerned with getting folks where they needed to be on time. There proved little to do in that department. As I spent time with each student in our fifty-man class, I found them all to be professional and highly motivated. Although bombers were traditionally regarded as less appealing than fighters, the seriousness of the nuclear mission, and the steep learning curve of B-52 training, compelled a focus and discipline that were gratifying to witness and to experience. I found myself drawn to the unrelenting attention to detail and the breadth of knowledge expected at every level of SAC, hallmarks instilled in the organization from its earliest days by General Curtis LeMay. He understood that perfection was the only standard in a mission where mistakes could have catastrophic consequences on a global scale. But, mistakes there have been; I would see far more than my share of them before the curtain closed on the drama of my long tenure in SAC, whose first act was now opening.

Before we proceed, I owe the reader a word of explanation regarding the detail I introduce into the narrative as I illuminate first the training program upon which I now embark, and then over the course of the chapter, the deeply rooted rhythms and culture of Strategic Air Command. This fine-grained depiction is essential to prepare you for the broader canvas I now begin to paint, its subject the vast universe that I entered as a fledging cadet, returned to while teaching American Defense Policy, and grappled with as an Action Officer: the
nuclear weapons enterprise. Now, I am about to cross the threshold of the operational arena, into the trenches where policy and plans translate into the nightmare prospect of nuclear war.

Student life is all about routines. For the next eight weeks, mine were exacting: up at 6:00 a.m., stretch, jog the perimeter of the parade ground, shower, eat a bowl of cereal, class at 8:00, lunch at noon, class until 4:00 p.m., back to the room, change, stretch, pushups and sit ups, bowl of soup, helmet on, study until 10:00, shower, in the bed. Every week I ran a few minutes longer than the last, added a push up and sit up, and wore the helmet until my neck told me it was time to stop. The only break in this tedium was Dorene’s visit over the Fourth of July, another glorious reunion that did wonders for our spirits.

With Dorene’s departure, I got back into harness, grinding through the minutiae of the B-52 fuel, electrical, hydraulic, flight control, landing gear, communications, and weapons delivery systems. The airplane is an absolutely extraordinary craft. Because of its multiple engines and backup systems, it can be forgiving within limits. But, it can also be rendered uncontrollable by such simple errors as improperly managing the sequence of fuel consumption from its multiple tanks. Further, the division of labor, especially between the pilot and navigator teams, required exacting coordination and precise communication. In the age of surface-to-air missiles, bombing was done from very low level, in daylight, the dark of night or blinding weather. That reduced the margin for navigation error to miniscule tolerances, in space and in time. Unlike the C-141, whose operational missions were normally marked by long stretches of low activity and auto-pilot controlled flight, a B-52 mission comprised a series of continuous and demanding transitions. Planning for a flight required a full day or more of intense effort by the entire crew. Nothing was simple; nothing could be taken for granted. Crew survival and mission success depended on strict adherence to checklists, precise calculations based on dense and complex tables of performance data, and in-flight teamwork that made the disciplined world of MAC’s standardized crews seem like child’s play.

As we neared the end of academics and prepared for the transition to our flight training squadron, we were given crew assignments. I was blessed with a talented and motivated bunch, and also had the good fortune to meet Captain Steve Lorenz, a tall, dark-haired young man with All-American good looks and a ready smile, who had been one of my Poly Sci students from the Air Force Academy Class of ’73 and was now checking out as an EC-135 aircraft commander. My early admiration was well placed; he subsequently worked for me as a colonel in the Pentagon, rose to four-star rank and on retiring
became head of the Air Force Academy’s premier fund-raising arm. As for my crew, we inherited an instructor pilot who was, well, an American original. A SAC veteran with over 5,000 hours of B-52 time, he was a laid-back, soft-spoken combat veteran, very much at ease in his position. High as he would go on the promotion ladder as a major, he was happy to live out his remaining days to the twenty-year retirement mark imparting his limitless knowledge of the BUFF to succeeding generations of student pilots. He was the perfect IP from my perspective, comfortable with the disparity in rank, respectful but demanding, and endlessly patient, a virtue my first turn at the controls would seriously test.

We spent a week learning the fundamentals of how to navigate the local training routes – which spanned thousands of miles, low-level bombing ranges, communications routines, emergency procedures, and how to plan a mission from scratch. Our first go required three days to 1) make our way through painstaking calculations of take-off and landing distances, 2) laboriously plot high- and low-altitude navigation routes, 3) select radar bombing offset aim points among prominent man-made and natural terrain features, 4) rehearse fuel management procedures, and 5) talk through checklist actions. We put special emphasis on the first challenge we would face after getting our behemoth airborne: rendezvous with a KC-135 tanker, my nemesis and savior from Vietnam F-4 days, and the techniques of air refueling. I looked forward to that with some trepidation, not having flown anything more demanding than a C-131 for the past four years while on staff duty in the Pentagon.

I was most anxious about the duration of the mission, which would require sixteen hours from the time we walked into Base Operations – three hours before take-off – until we left the post-flight maintenance debriefing an hour after landing. My fitness program had begun to pay off, but I was under no illusion about the stress of this mission. I also knew I had to do well from the get-go; I was plowing entirely new ground on a tight schedule. And, there was an even greater incentive to earn my spurs. SAC was a very close-knit community and word got around quickly. I was already something of a spectacle; the last thing I could afford was to become a laughingstock.

I spent a restless night on the eve of our first mission, tossing and turning, and rehearsing the hundreds of sequential actions that would begin at 0530 when I would meet my crew and IP at Base Operations. My mind clicked on a half-hour before the alarm sounded at 0400, and I was already running on adrenaline. I went very deliberately through my wake-up routine, tried to clear my mind of everything but the coming mission and made the short drive to the flight line. We double-checked the weather, recalculated the takeoff
parameters, filed our flight plan and got on the shuttle bus that would deliver us to our aircraft. We were scheduled for a 0830 take-off, leaving two hours to work our way through the long pre-take-off procedures, beginning with a check of the aircraft forms to ensure all maintenance actions were signed off and the proper fuel load was on board and to note any unusual conditions recorded by the technicians.

Next came the visual check of the aircraft, a 360-degree walk around the bird to look for leaks, loose panels, or anything else amiss. I could not help but be struck by the enormity of the B-52 as I made my way around it. It measured nearly 160 feet from nose to tail, stood some 40 feet high at the tip of the vertical stabilizer and had a 185-foot wing span, 65 feet longer than the Wright brothers’ first flight. Although I was a seasoned pilot, the thought of wrestling this beast into the air was intimidating.

The interior of the BUFF is as cramped and confining as the exterior is expansive. On entering through the under-belly hatch, with its drop-down stairs, the dark recesses of the navigation station lie straight ahead, housing side-by-side seats facing a narrow work table attached to a forward wall of electronic systems that spill over onto the ceiling and both sides of the compartment. Not only is there no window to help keep some connection with the outside world, the radar navigator and his companion sit in seats that eject downward, meaning that in emergencies below 2000 feet, they have no means of escape. The instructor navigator is even worse off, his seat being a small, fold-down device located between and just behind the two students. His only option is to dive through one of the holes in the floor created by the ejected navigation team.

Access to the pilot, electronic warfare officer (EWO, but called the E-Dub) and gunner area is gained by means of a ladder located just at the top of the entry stairs, a larger compartment that becomes as crowded as the first level when an IP, instructor EWO and an instructor gunner are added. The pilot seats are also side-by-side, encircled by a forest of dials and switches. Between the seats sits the throttle quadrant, a metal wedge that houses eight neatly numbered levers rising from its multi-slotted center. The throttles can be manipulated individually, being splayed apart at their tips, or collectively by means of a set of tightly clustered knobs mounted halfway up their shafts. Other critical control devices and switches are mounted on the quadrant, making it efficient but difficult to master. Eventually, using its features would become second nature; on the first mission it looked like a hydra-headed monster. As I crawled into my seat and strapped in, donned my helmet and tuned up the intercom, despite hours in the simulator I felt awkward and disoriented, every
movement unfamiliar and requiring great concentration. I was already tired, and it was only 0730.

A half-hour later, we had managed to get all eight engines started, all of the requisite systems running, completed the Before Taxi checklist and were ready to coax the plane from the chocks. I released the parking brake, advanced the throttles and nothing happened, at least not right away. As I was soon to learn in spades, nothing in this airplane happens quickly; one doesn’t so much fly the BUFF as negotiate with it. This machine is all about feel and anticipation, patience and tricks of the trade. Its long wheel base and outrigger landing gear located near the wing tips make taxiing more of an art than a science. Gauging clearance from objects on the ground is very deceptive, especially in a turn when the inside wing tip actually backs up. I felt like I was prodding a reluctant elephant all the way to the runway threshold, trying without much success to remain on the center line of the taxiway, maintain a constant speed, and start and end my turns at just the right point to avoid wandering from one side to the other.

As we approached the runway, I was cleared for an immediate takeoff. After completing yet another checklist I taxied into position, set the brakes, moved the throttles to eighty percent power, checked multiple sets of eight performance parameters, and released the brakes. What followed was the most dangerous phase of the flight. Every B-52 launch is meticulously calculated, the most important metric being the “go-no-go” speed: the point during takeoff roll beyond which the aircraft cannot be stopped on the remaining runway if the takeoff is aborted. That point is announced by the word “go,” spoken over the intercom by the radar navigator. Subsequently, the airplane will either continue to accelerate to sufficient speed to get airborne, or become a massive projectile whose stopping point will be determined by Newton’s Second Law, marked by a towering fireball. That sobering eventuality can come down to a matter of a few feet, and I would soon experience the heart-pounding sensation of watching the end of a ten-thousand-foot runway approach on a hot summer day with the wheels still on the pavement. Computing takeoff data is very serious business: errors can be fatal. I would learn soon enough how serious the computation was viewed; four years later I would witness firsthand the real-world consequences.

This morning, however, we got it right. At the anticipated liftoff speed, I eased back on the steering wheel-like yoke and felt gravity release its grip. Remembering to keep the nose level, I stepped on the brakes to stop the wheel rotation, raised the gear handle, set the desired climb angle and raised the flaps at the proper speed and altitude. The controls felt heavy but responsive,
and I managed to stay fairly close to the designated departure instructions, trying to keep up with the radio calls and cascading checklist demands. This was all vaguely reminiscent of my first F-4 training mission, especially the mildly claustrophobic feeling created by my helmet and the tight quarters. Thank God the speed at which events unfolded was considerably slower, or I would have been well behind the airplane by this point. As it was, we got to our assigned cruising altitude without any serious missteps, but the next challenge was on us immediately: find and rendezvous with the tanker that awaited us for the aerial refueling phase of the flight.

Joining with a tanker is typically done with the tanker orbiting in a holding pattern awaiting the arrival of its mate. As the receiving aircraft nears the vicinity, it establishes radio and radar contact, allowing the navigators in each plane to coordinate the rendezvous. Their shared objective is to create a head-on closure geometry, with two miles of lateral spacing, and then calculate precisely the point when the tanker initiates a 180-degree turn so as to roll out a mile ahead of the receiver while traveling at exactly the same speed. Experienced crews can pull this off with seeming ease. Students can find endless ways to screw it up, prolonging the rejoin for several minutes. We were no exception, ending up well behind the tanker and chasing it for miles. Finally, we managed to pull into the pre-contact position, completed the requisite checklist, and then were treated to an effortless demonstration of refueling by the IP. After a few minutes on the boom, the positioning lights on the belly of the tanker, which fully illuminate once the boom is firmly seated in the receptacle, began to look familiar again. However, establishing reference points for gauging my position prior to contact proved much more challenging than in the F-4, which had better forward visibility and far superior maneuverability. Nonetheless, I felt reasonably confident when the IP disconnected, retreated to the pre-contact position and gave me the controls. That feeling was short-lived.

It was if the airplane sensed a novice was now at the controls, resented my inexperience and decided to quit responding to commands coming from my side of the cockpit. I added power and the throttle movement was ignored. I added more power and suddenly the plane began moving forward way too fast, prompting a reduction in power which was equally ignored, resulting in an unsafe closure rate and a greater power reduction, at which point the airplane acted as if it had hit a brick wall, slowing rapidly and creating way too much separation, leading to a long chase back to the pre-contact position. Even more frustrating than trying to solve the closure equation was the alignment challenge. Try as I might, I could not keep my plane directly behind the
tanker, obviously essential to getting the boom from the tanker into the receptacle located in the spine of the BUFF. Although the tanker was rock solid on autopilot, I was wandering from wingtip to wingtip like a drunken sailor. As I slid left, I commanded right aileron to stop the movement, which the plane ignored. That prompted an additional input to which it reacted like a shot of adrenalin, taking us rapidly out past the right wingtip of the tanker.

After observing this comedy for half an hour, the IP finally took pity and decided to actually do some instructing. “Butler,” he said, “you’re making this way too hard. Something to remember about the B-52. This is not an F-4. That’s why it has a different designation. You have to give the little squirrels time to tell the controls what to do after you give them a message. It’s a long way from the yoke out to the ailerons. The engines need time to negotiate with the inertia of this monster. Relax your hands. Be patient. Make small corrections. Feel the response.” He was right, of course. I had a death grip on the yoke and throttles, my flight suit was soaking wet, and every muscle in my body was on fire. I sat back, tried to relax, watched another expert demonstration, and made another go at it, this time with some measure of success, actually getting a momentary contact. By the end of the refueling period, I could manage to hang on for upwards of five minutes in level flight in clear, smooth air and brilliant sunshine. I could only imagine the proficiency required to do this for thirty minutes at a crack while maneuvering at night, in poor weather and turbulent air. Thoroughly humbled, I turned to the heading that would take us to the training range for our first shot at low-level radar bombing, some ninety minutes distant. It was now 1130, I was utterly exhausted, drenched in perspiration and having trouble regaining my concentration for the tasks ahead. All nine hours of them.

The long run to the low-level route gave us some breathing room, a chance to rummage through the box lunch, gather our thoughts and review the bombing procedures. The rest of my crew were innocent bystanders during my refueling travails, but the navigation team was about to be tested big time. Radar bombing is the heart and soul of the strategic mission. Once refueling is complete, the pilot team’s responsibility is to position the airplane according to the dictates of the radar navigator, initiating turns and altitude and speed changes precisely as commanded. My first crucial lesson about SAC bomber operations was the central role of the radar navigator, who bore the ultimate responsibility for getting the weapons on target. The EW and the gunner were modest security blankets, the pilots were highly skilled chauffeurs, and the navigator was a vital helpmate. But at the end of the day, if the radar navigator missed his course timing, failed to find the target in the clutter of the returns on his
radar screen, or got the release point wrong by even a fraction of a second, the entire mission was compromised. Once I grasped this central reality, I made myself an expert in the position, drawing on my early navigator training to relearn the business and build ties to a fraternity that had my utmost respect and appreciation.

We reached our descent point, completed more checklists, made our way down into the training route and leveled off at the prescribed altitude, several hundred feet above the terrain. Tired or not, the airplane now had my undivided attention. Anticipating pronounced terrain changes, watching for unmarked obstacles, and holding the course centerline, especially through sweeping turns, was not just about professional flying, it was a matter of life and death. Personal and crew discipline were crucial to mission success and staying alive. Although no stranger to low-level flying, doing this blind, in mountainous terrain, often the wartime norm, was an extremely daunting prospect, a level of proficiency I knew I would have to master to gain the respect of my crew force.

It was a credit to our classroom training and preparation that we flew the low-level route safely and with a modicum of success. Finding the targets, getting through the bombing checklists and executing the release was a classic goat rope on the first run, but we steadily improved and felt pretty good coming off the range and climbing out to our return altitude.

The sun was getting low in the sky as we turned west for the 90-minute leg back to Castle AFB. I was now operating on deep reserves, the fatigue I had pushed to the back of my mind during low-level hitting hard as I set the autopilot and slumped back in my seat. Somehow I had to muster the energy for what lay ahead: a final hour spent in the traffic pattern practicing approaches and landings. I knew it would be dark by the time we arrived, but the first approach would be radar-guided so I would have an opportunity to step through one touch-and-go with a set of electronic eyes helping to establish the proper speed and glide path. By now, the controls were much more familiar, my anticipation was much improved, and I began to feel like I was flying the plane rather than simply manipulating the controls. Conversely, I knew it would be a very different machine in the landing configuration, and I had no sense of the landing picture, the roll-out or the liftoff at a much lighter gross weight as part of the touch-and-go.

The IP had gained sufficient confidence in my flying skills by now to let me keep control all the way to touchdown, although he followed me through on the yoke, rudder pedals and throttles every second. The winds were light so I didn’t have to deal with the challenging technique of turning the fuselage into the wind while aligning the main landing gear with the runway center line, an
essential skill in the B-52. To my relief, the landings went amazingly well, putting a nice finish to the second longest but by far the most challenging flight of my career. I had made a fourteen-hour flight in the C-141, but most of it was spent on autopilot high over the Pacific. By the time I got this BUFF in the chocks, shut it down, filled out the forms, spent an hour in maintenance debrief, found the Camaro and drove back to my room, I had been through an airborne obstacle course as physically and intellectually demanding as anything I had ever attempted in an airplane. Although I had pulled it off, it was far more difficult than I had imagined, I was dead tired, and I had the nagging feeling that this time I might have bitten off more than I could chew. At the tender age of thirty-eight, I was feeling old and out of my element. I was beginning to wonder if SAC had a comfort zone.

The next day was spent in a lengthy and very detailed rehash of the mission. The navigation team studied film of the bomb runs while the rest of us were debriefed by our instructors. My IP seemed satisfied with my performance and had little to offer in the way of criticism. My difficulties were apparently within the norm, and my proficiency had improved markedly as the mission progressed. I knew by now that my success depended on mastering the long and complex sequence of events that governed a typical flight from mission planning to final debrief – and continuing to improve my physical fitness. I had to leave Castle AFB with a strong foundation on both counts in order to deal with the duties that awaited me at Griffiss. On that note, a stroke of good fortune befell: the new 416th Bomb Wing commander, Colonel Dick Kiefer, was passing through and dropped by my room to introduce himself. I liked him immediately, sensing a kinship born of the fact that he was a career-long tanker guy who had just been entrusted with a B-52 outfit, an only slightly less bizarre scenario than a newbie like me coming in with no SAC experience, period. This chance meeting proved invaluable, providing an early link with a man whose trust and support would be essential to my service in his organization and, as it turned out, in helping Dorene to get settled at Griffiss before my arrival. The Kiefers were our neighbors across the street, a proximity that promoted comfortable family relationships.

The three days of mission planning for the second training flight gave me a chance to recover physically, and to mentally fly the entire twelve hours again and again until I could picture most of it from memory. That led to a much better performance and restored my flagging confidence. As I approached my tenth flight of the fifteen-flight program, my IP said I had learned all he could teach me and put me up for the course completion check ride. I was a little taken aback, but he said not to worry, he would be my copilot, the check pilot
was a good guy and things would go fine. He could not have been more wrong.

When I showed up at the squadron on mission planning day, my IP had been transformed from the cool professional I had come to know and trust to a nervous wreck, his hand visibly shaking as he threw down an ocean of coffee. “There’s been a change of plan,” he said; “CEVG landed this morning and they are going to take your check ride.” “What,” I asked innocently, “is a CEVG and where are they taking my check ride?” He stared at me like I had come from another planet, which in effect I had. “It’s the SAC Combat Evaluation Group,” he growled, “a bunch of prima donnas who go unannounced from base to base to spot check aircrew proficiency and knowledge.” I could not imagine why someone with his capabilities and experience would be so worried about a no-notice check ride. I was getting my first insight into the SAC “take no prisoners” mentality that had been ingrained in the command psyche from its earliest days under General Curtis LeMay. This was a one-mistake outfit, where judgments were swift and merciless, even in training. I could not help but see the face of my hapless flight commander at Craig AFB, the SAC cast-off who was afraid of his own shadow, incapable of making a decision and saw my ejection as a threat to what remained of his tattered career.

We completed our mission planning, which was then checked and re-checked by every supervisor in the squadron before it was turned over to CEVG for scrutiny prior to the next day’s flight. Despite my IP’s angst, I was relatively calm, by now feeling quite capable in the airplane. However, when I arrived at Base Ops at 0700 the next morning for a 0830 go, that calm was tested by a marked deterioration in my IP’s already shaky emotional state, brought on by the arrival of the CEVG check pilot – Captain America. Standing at the counter in quiet magnificence, our nemesis for the next twelve hours was right out of a recruiting poster. Perfectly coiffed blond hair, pressed and creased flight suit, white silk scarf exactly in place, and gleaming combat boots, he was the picture of SAC perfection. Soft spoken and slightly distant, he assured us that he was simply there to observe and would only intervene in the event of a safety concern.

Since I had been an IP, and had taken any number of check rides over the years, this was all standard stuff to me, and true to his word, Captain America faded quietly into the background. Things proceeded on track as we filed the flight plan and headed for the airplane. From there it was all downhill. Our assigned bird was in pieces when we arrived, suffering from numerous maintenance problems. A spare was not available, so there was nothing to do but wait. By the time the last panel was buttoned up we were three hours behind schedule, the sun was high in the sky and the temperature had climbed at least
twenty degrees. We finally got cranked up at 11:00 a.m. and taxied to the end of the runway. We stopped short of the runway to allow the copilot, my IP, to recompute the takeoff data, because there would be a large disparity between what we had calculated for an 8:00 a.m. departure and the longer roll promised by the heat waves rising from the concrete. Although this was a calculation he had made thousands of times, my right-seat companion was laboring over the charts, finally producing the speed and distance settings necessary to execute a safe departure. He erased the old data from the Plexiglas covered board posted at eye level between our seats, entered the new information in grease pencil, and called for clearance onto the runway. At that point, I made a grievous mistake: I ignored my instincts. Something about the data didn’t seem right, the change in the go-no-go speed not what I had expected, although I couldn’t put my mental finger on my concern. I made a snap decision to trust my IP’s work, and advanced the throttles. At that point, Captain America spoke over the intercom: “Lieutenant Colonel Butler, do you accept the revised takeoff data?”

Now I made my second mistake. Despite being given an obvious opportunity to act on my instincts, I again ignored them and answered in the affirmative. The next words from the jump seat were issued with crushing authority: “Stop the airplane.” As I applied the brakes, my copilot went into a full-blown meltdown. His panic was palpable. He had just experienced his worst nightmare – a CEVG intervention during a flight evaluation.

This time, the data recalculation was sheer torture, a prolonged agony that seemed to drag on forever. When the numbers finally came, I carefully rechecked and verified them, as did Captain America, who then cleared us to proceed. Oddly, this bit of drama served to clear my head, and I went on to fly a strong flight. The crew was at the top of their game, the refueling went perfectly, as did the low-level bombing, and my pattern work was solid. When we finally shut down the airplane and climbed out, I was feeling very good about the ride, a bit of self-delusion that was first affirmed and then shattered by Captain America. “That was an excellent flight, Lieutenant Colonel Butler; however, the rules require that it be graded unsatisfactory.” Red alert. If I heard him correctly, he had just told me I had failed my end of course check ride, which was my worst nightmare. Nor could I argue with the logic.

Notwithstanding the fact that my copilot was an IP and nominally in charge of the flight unless the check pilot intervened, I was still the aircraft commander and bore equal responsibility for the safety of the crew. My student status was no shield, nor should it have been. I had ignored an alarm bell sounded in my head triggered by years of experience in a variety of aircraft and flight conditions. This was a lesson I didn’t need to re-learn.
The busted check ride created consternation among the Castle AFB hierarchy, because of my senior status and the experience of the IP. In the end, they fell back on the standard routine, hauling me before a board headed by the DCO, where I was summarily chastised and required to do a takeoff roll calculation under the watchful eyes of the bemused observers. I have no idea what befell my instructor, but it could not have been pretty. Actually, I was fortunate not to have to re-fly the mission, since my transgression occurred during the initial ground operation. Consequently, I was released from training immediately following the board. I wasted no time in getting out of Dodge, happy to escape with a flesh wound – painful, embarrassing, but not fatal, much like my long-ago busted check ride in the T-37. I left, knowing I could fly the B-52 well enough, that my skills would improve with time, and that, in the final analysis, my reputation at Griffiss would hang on my performance as assistant DCO and my relationship with my boss. That, it turned out, would prove to be a very dicey proposition.

The long drive to Griffiss was uneventful. I treated myself to an intermediate stop in Arlington, Virginia, where Dorene joined me, to attend the twentieth reunion of my Washington & Lee graduating class. Although pleasant, the interlude also served to underscore how different my life had been from the paths taken by my friends going back two decades. I had difficulty reconnecting with them, a gulf that closed somewhat when my oarsmen from 1957 – seven of the eight were present – prevailed on me to compete with them in the traditional alumni races that were held as part of the reunion festivities. Though all of us carried more weight, rather diversely distributed, we were as competitive as ever. Pete Kresky was his same irascible self, and we won our race handily. My guys took special pleasure in celebrating the victory by throwing my thirty-eight-year-old butt into the Potomac River.

Then, it was on to Griffiss, where Dorene had gone through another maddening encounter with a base housing bureaucracy, this one hung up on the fact that, since I had not yet pinned on the rank of full colonel, I could not be assigned to a set of quarters reserved for that august status. A friend from Academy days called to alert me to the issue, and I got in touch with another grad who had the clout to successfully intervene. That allowed delivery of our household goods, on August 25th, of all days – our 17th wedding anniversary. To add injury to insult, there had been extensive damage, to the point that the driver had taken the load “on exception.” That of course required hours of additional work filing endless papers to recover the associated costs. All of that travail allowed me to walk into a familiar and comfortable setting with only a few pictures left to hang. Dorene had again done the heavy lifting, made do
with summer clothes in unseasonably cold weather, gotten the kids in school, learned the base and its facilities, and met some of the neighbors and public servants. At the top of the list was Fred the funky mailman who, upon seeing my rank of lieutenant colonel on a piece of mail, was quick to inform Dorene that she wasn’t authorized to be living in colonel’s quarters. Apparently the iron protocols of the housing office had support even among the locals. The final indignity was not being allowed to join the officers’ club, an essential support group, until I formally signed in to the base.

Our initially poor impression of Rome was reinforced by closer inspection. The town was downright depressing, the public schools were mediocre, and the weather quickly turned abysmal. Soon after our arrival we noted the addition of ten-foot-tall wands, topped by small orange balls, attached to all of the fire hydrants on the base and in the city. Naïvely inquiring as to their purpose, we were dismayed to learn they were designed to aid the fire department in locating the buried water hydrants as the accumulated snow inexorably mounted higher and higher each winter. That was difficult to picture during the dry autumn that marked our first few weeks, but the awesome spectacle of “lake effect” snow soon brought things into focus.

My introduction into the DCO organization was also unsettling. It was headed by a solid but stoic colonel named Herb Jordan, a lifelong SAC guy who had slogged his way up the ladder, done competent service and was nearing the end of his career. When I arrived at his two-story headquarters, situated on the brow of a hill overlooking the flight line, I was greeted by his secretary, Marlene, and the assistant DCO, Colonel Tony Doren, who to our mutual chagrin, like Herb, had not been informed of my assignment to his position. We were all nonplussed and tried to make the best of an awkward moment. Somehow, the system had failed to convey a decision long since taken at SAC Headquarters to move Herb to the base commander position and move Tony up to the DCO job. A quick phone call cleared up the confusion, but it was a tenuous start to my relationship with Tony, who struggled to get comfortable with me and with his new responsibilities. He knew the crew force well, but was by nature insular and cautious and kept score on everything from perceived slights to maintenance deviations from the monthly contracts that married ready aircraft and aircrew availability to support the training schedule. This was new territory for me, and it took me awhile to grasp this systemic tension that had reached the boiling point at Griffiss. I had a lot to learn about colonel-to-colonel relations at wing level, and this was a bad environment to begin my education.

The 416th Bomb Wing was a typical B-52 unit, with sixteen assigned
bombers and an equal number of tankers, with all of each aircraft type allotted to a squadron headed by a lieutenant colonel, with its own headquarters building and staff. The bombers were equipped to carry a mix of nuclear bombs and short range attack missiles (SRAMs), targeted on a wide array of adversary installations. Daily training was focused on simulating these wartime or Emergency War Order (EWO) missions, to include in-flight refueling, high-altitude navigation, descent to low level, surface-to-air missile radar jamming, low-level navigation and bombing, and recovery. One-quarter of the bombers and tankers were on continuous alert, fully fueled and the bombers loaded with their assigned nuclear weapons. These aircraft were parked in a dedicated area adjacent to the end of the runway that also housed a living facility for the air and maintenance crews during their seven-day long, around-the-clock tours of duty. The job of the DCO staff was to schedule the crews, conduct ground and airborne training, assess performance and ensure the crews were at all times prepared to carry out either their EWO mission or the twice-annual, no-notice Operational Readiness Inspections (ORIs) conducted by the SAC Inspector General, whose team was home-based at SAC Headquarters. The aircrews were the tip of a long spear, whose shaft comprised a host of support organizations, including maintenance, logistics, security, airfield operations, and a wide array of other base functions from chapel services to clubs, housing, the commissary, and the BX, as well as an on-base hospital with a full array of doctors, nurses, and clinics. Every aspect of daily life was geared to the demands and rhythms of the wartime mission. Alert crews had precedence at all facilities for the brief periods they were allowed to leave the alert pad, and every building was equipped with a klaxon device, whose sudden blare would set off a frenetic race to waiting vehicles and a high-speed dash to the flight line. The alert exercise I had witnessed during my IP days at Craig had now become the focal point of my life, a critical few minutes each week, triggered from SAC Headquarters according to the dictates of a schedule that took no mind of the hour or the weather, and that demanded the utmost in crew discipline and supervisory oversight.

I immersed myself in every aspect of the mission, from the assigned EWO targets, the tactical doctrine that governed crew actions in the minutest detail, and the routines of daily training. After checking out locally, I made it a point to fly with each of the crews, to spend a part of each week at the alert facility, and to understand the work of every staff element. Tony provided no guidance or insight, and I simply tried to be discreet and respectful in his presence. Dorene and I made certain to get to the officers’ club to mix and mingle with our peers and subordinates, as well as the wide range of support people on whose work
the DCO complex depended. We were for the most part treated well, most es-

pecially by the bomber and tanker squadron commanders and their spouses,

who seemed to welcome our interest and involvement. We gradually gained

some sense of how the base functioned, its politics and personalities, and the

roles we could productively play without appearing unduly forward or ambi-
tious. My efforts to keep a low profile began to reap dividends in terms of ac-

cceptance into a brotherhood to which I had paid no dues. And then my friend,

Charlie Stebbins, nearly queered the deal with one phone call.

The day came when Tony felt confident enough to go fly a training mission

and leave me in charge, which included attending the wing commander’s daily

4:00 p.m. staff meeting. Just as Colonel Kiefer had started the proceedings,

his secretary interrupted a bit breathlessly to hand him a note which he read,

cocked an eyebrow, and then turned to me and said, “Lee, you have a call from

the White House.” I knew instantly that Chaz, from his desk on the National

Security Council staff, was behind this calculated maneuver – which actually

gave me an extraordinary opportunity. Without the slightest hesitation, looking

directly at the secretary, I replied, “Please tell them I will call back.” The

room fell dead silent. Colonel Kiefer gave me a knowing look that signaled his

appreciation of this courtesy.

As the months passed, winter arrived in earnest, with the temperature
dropping well below freezing and generally staying there. While I was no

stranger to cold, having spent several frigid winters at the Academy in the foot-
hills of the Rockies, the snow was another matter. It fell week after week, pow-
erful storms laden with moisture from Lake Erie that brought several inches

with each pass, none of which ever seemed to melt. The role of the orange

balls soon became apparent, as the towering drifts mounted foot by foot from

almost daily snowfalls and the additional volume hurled aloft by the snow-
clearing machines, or laboriously lifted by shovel to keep a path cleared from

front door to driveway. As the long winter advanced, the streets and sidewalks

became bounded by towering walls of snow ten to fifteen feet high, greatly

reducing driving visibility and creating the sensation of living in a giant maze.

Getting anywhere required considerable advance work to put on warm cloth-
ing, clear the sidewalk, clear the driveway, clean off the car and creep along

the icy streets.

Running a B-52 and KC-135 outfit with a nuclear mission under such condi-
tions was a whole other matter. Every task, every activity was affected by the
cold and the snow, most particularly the alert operation, where fully loaded

and “cocked” (carrying nuclear weapons) aircraft had to be maintained in

perfect flying condition, rotated in and out of the alert area, and occasionally
downloaded for weapons change-out or heavy maintenance. The freedom of the alert crews within the base was much more constrained because of the longer response times over slippery roads or poor driving conditions during blizzards. Launching and recovering the training missions could get very risky. Keeping the runway clear was a top priority; it was not unusual to see a fleet of snowplows working around the clock and still having difficulty keeping the runway surface sufficiently clear to permit safe flight operation.

The physical demands imposed by the horrendous weather over eight months of the year affected our entire family. Dorene and the children did the bulk of the snow shoveling, at all hours of the day and night depending on my schedule. I had to take the challenge head-on, sustaining my running program no matter what nature presented, mushing through sleet or snow for an hour every day without fail. I wore a ski mask to protect my face, learned to dress in layers, changed hands with my clunky mobile radio every hundred yards or so, and just gutted it out. My conditioning gradually improved to the point that I could crank out five miles without strain, and I actually began to look forward to my daily run. We made a family decision to make the best of our wintry circumstances by taking up skiing at Woods Valley, a convenient and accommodating ski facility located thirty minutes from the base. After a few lessons, we were all comfortable on the intermediate slope and dedicated at least two nights a week to our wintry pastime.

Brett and Lisa also added Little Theater to their leisure pursuits, winning roles in Through the Looking-Glass as the White Rabbit and Dormouse, respectively. With her newfound acting chops, Lisa even played a young boy in On Borrowed Time. Public school proved far less appealing, however, to the point that we enrolled Lisa in parochial school, fearful that she might fall behind in her studies. Brett, now a freshman, unfortunately had no alternative and had to make the best of a bad deal. His classroom work was anything but challenging, and his classmates were not very supportive, including a bully who bled his nose. However, he sucked it up, made the wrestling team, suffered through a mostly losing season, and remained his usual affable self. We were proud of them for coping with an assignment where none of us felt comfortable with our surroundings, weren’t sure of the ultimate outcome and wondered on more than one occasion if this foray into Strategic Air Command was really a smart move. That question took on real urgency when my relationship with Colonel Tony Doren suddenly blew up without a word of warning.

This rift was deeply rooted. It grew out of Tony’s tightly wound persona, and my failure to recognize how he perceived me. I thought we had arrived at a nice balance of roles and responsibilities, and a solid foundation of mutual
trust. Tony had presided over my full colonel promotion ceremony in the spring with humor and grace. Further, as his relationship with Colonel Jim Crabb, the deputy commander for maintenance (DCM), deteriorated – they had actually gotten into a shoving match after one daily staff meeting – he entrusted me with the job of hammering out the monthly sortie, i.e., aircraft availability, contract which was typically done at a DCO-DCM meeting in the latter’s conference room. I found Jim Crabb to be a great guy and was embarrassed by Tony’s sense that Jim was out to make him look bad. I never imagined he might have seen me in the same light, and Dorene had befriended his wife, a lovely woman with a sweet soul.

As I later reconstructed events in my mind, it was clear the train went off the rails over an initiative born of General Dougherty’s retirement in October of 1977, the month I arrived at Griffiss. Given the central role he had played in my career, his sterling record, his reputation as a personable and beloved leader, and his deep affection for his wife, Geralee, Dorene and I hit upon the idea of naming the Alert Crew Family Visitation Center for Mrs. Dougherty, who had recently died of breast cancer. We envisioned this as a way of honoring her own service to SAC and the nation, as well as celebrating the role and acknowledging the sacrifices of families who persevered while their husband or wife, Mom or Dad, pulled alert duty month after month. If Colonel Kiefer bought the proposition, it would also free up desperately needed dollars to bring the facility up to par. I ran the idea by Tony, who accepted it, but without much enthusiasm – that should have been a clue – and presented it to Colonel Kiefer, who thought it was terrific. He promised us the resources if General Dougherty agreed to the initiative, which the general did with his usual grace and warmth, promising to participate personally in the dedication ceremony, and we were off and running. Our next stop was the crew force, who responded with a host of good ideas and a willingness to take on the long agenda of self-help projects that grew out of brainstorming sessions.

A design for the wholesale makeover of the building and grounds was created, and work got underway, requiring several months to complete. Dorene and I created an agenda for the dedication ceremony that maximized General Dougherty’s face time with the crew force and their families, and with a large contingent of local civic leaders whom he had courted in his inimitable style while serving as the commander of SAC. The night before the big day, a marvelous addition to the project arrived in the form of a huge montage of personal Dougherty family photographs that showed up on our doorstep late one evening, shepherded by its creator, Major Brett Dula, a former aide to General Dougherty. Brett had heard about the dedication, rummaged through his huge
collection of pictures saved from his years as an aide, and personally arranged his favorites in a magnificent frame of his own making. Then he had hitched a ride to Griffiss on a KC-135, found our quarters at 9:00 that night and became an instant friend. The montage went perfectly on a wall in the cozy great room of the alert facility, becoming a focal point and a symbol of the importance of family. That type of initiative got Brett to the rank of three stars over the course of his career.

The ceremony and its associated events went perfectly. General Dougherty was visibly moved by the facility, its dedication plaque to Geralee, which read simply, “She also served,” and the respect he was given by the crews and their families. He gave a superb after-dinner speech that evening at the Officers’ Club, enthralling the civilian contingent with his stories of times past and the strong ties between base and community. I went to school on his masterful performance, making it a template for the scores of occasions when I would later stand in his place and address similar audiences.

What I had failed to do in my focus on General Dougherty was give due visibility to Tony Doren. In retrospect, it was obvious he felt left out of the loop in this event which was on his turf, and the resentment smoldered for several weeks. It erupted into flames quite unexpectedly one day around noon, when I dropped by his quarters to address some issue that I felt needed his attention. Tony had just returned from his daily run and was dripping wet with perspiration. He invited me into his study, heard me out, and then without warning launched into a quiet but pointed dressing down in which he essentially accused me of being disloyal. No specifics, just wounded pride and hurt feelings spilling out, barely controlled. I was stunned and showed it. His diatribe caught me emotionally flat-footed and brought tears to my eyes. I was smart enough not to argue or try and defend myself. Rather, I apologized, struggling mightily to control my own feelings and told him I would do my best to regain his trust. He seemed mollified, even appreciative of my response, and for the most part we put the incident behind us. I talked it over at length with Dorene, who came to much the same conclusion about the origins and how to deal with the aftermath. Things would never be quite the same, but once again fate intervened to make the matter largely moot. Fate, in this particular instance, took the form of the SAC Inspector General and his team of inspectors who arrived to conduct our annual no-notice Operational Readiness Inspection. It was an unmitigated disaster.

The SAC IG was one of the most feared men on the planet. With his team of one hundred inspectors, he dropped out of the sky unannounced on an unsuspecting SAC base and, for up to ten days, put an organization through a
rigorous, excruciatingly detailed series of evaluations that served as the unit’s annual report card to the SAC four-star Commander-in-Chief. These inspections began with an around-the-clock generation of alert bomber and tanker sorties during which every available aircraft, no matter its maintenance condition at the time, had to be brought to its wartime configuration according to an exacting schedule that left no margin for error in timing, fuel loading, weapons mating, or any of a host of other parameters. All of the aircrews were assembled in the alert facility, where they underwent extensive testing, verified the condition of their assigned aircraft, and remained until the kickoff of the flight phase. That crucial test, designed to mimic wartime conditions as closely as possible, began with a klaxon blast that sent crews racing to their aircraft where, in a complex and carefully choreographed sequence, air and ground crews cleared the engine covers and other safety devices, started and connected ground power units, got the radios up and running, copied the encrypted message that carried their execution order, started their engines, tailed from the chocks and joined a parade of thirty-two aircraft that would next perform one of the riskiest maneuvers ever concocted: the minimum interval take-off, or MITO.

The MITO was conceived as a response to a wholesale, surprise nuclear attack by the Soviet Union, in which hundreds of land- and sea-based intercontinental ballistic missiles would be launched nearly simultaneously. A primary objective of such a massive attack would be to strike U.S. ICBMs in their silos, strategic submarines in their ports, and strategic bombers at their air bases and thus destroy the retaliatory capability of the United States, and then devastate its population and infrastructure through follow-on strikes by successive waves of long-range bombers, completing the carnage with thousands of additional nuclear bombs. The United States has adopted a retaliatory or so-called “second-strike strategy,” that is, in keeping with our democratic ideals, we are committed to engaging in nuclear war only in response to an enemy first strike against us. That puts many of our strategic nuclear forces under unrelenting stress, dependent for survival on prompt and precise actions in response to the earliest possible warning. For the strategic bomber and tanker forces, that means rapid launch prior to the arrival of the enemy’s in-bound nuclear strikes, often under the most extreme conditions. The most challenging action required is to maintain not more than a nine-second take-off interval between each of the alert bombers and tankers. The five minutes required to complete a MITO launch during an ORI were the most heart-stopping moments of my professional career, a flirtation with disaster that I witnessed dozens of times during my SAC years, when I filled positions as assistant DCO.
DCO, vice wing commander, twice wing commander, and for over two years, the SAC Inspector General. As you will read in Chapter Eighteen, there were countless ways this process could go terribly wrong; it is a tribute to the professionalism of SAC crews that it was done so frequently and successfully during over four decades of the Cold War.

Once airborne during the ORI, the stream of bomber and tanker aircraft paired up in their assigned refueling areas, took on the required loads under the additional pressure of losing valuable points in the event of a disconnect, navigated to a low-level route they had studied but never flown, attacked designated targets whose radar images they had only seen in estimated form as conceived by DCO staff experts, and finally recovered to home base to learn the results as recorded electronically by monitors along the route. This was the moment of truth for the wing, one that took several hours to materialize due to the delay in recording, transmitting and deciphering the results from the sixteen bomber sorties. However, although there were occasionally surprises, the outcome could usually be safely estimated from the first-hand reports of the crews, each of whom was met planeside by the DCO and wing commander upon their return.

On this September night of 1978, these reports were not good. Crew after crew reported difficulty finding the targets or getting their simulated weapons within the prescribed scoring radius. The mood was already grim when the IG team chief, a grizzled former B-52 wing commander who had not made the cut to one-star general, arrived to announce the outcome. The flight phase was Unsatisfactory. Very much so. The worst performance in SAC history. Red Alert. Heads would roll – or so we thought.

SAC Headquarters was now fully engaged. A busted ORI went to the core of the mission. It was reported back in Washington to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and to the Secretary of Defense. There was a small tear in the fabric of deterrence. This was a very big deal. The hammer fell the next day, with the arrival on base of the SAC vice commander, the designated bearer of tough news for General Ellis. He called the senior staff together, along with the operational and maintenance squadron commanders and their staffs, and unloaded with both barrels, sparing nothing and no one. We would be required to re-fly the ORI route within ninety days, but in the meantime, some personnel changes would be made, to be announced shortly. Blessedly and astonishingly, when those moves came they were modest, indeed, rather forgiving, and in my case actually entailed a promotion. Colonel Kiefer stayed in place, at least for the moment, as did Colonel Jim Crabb. Colonel Herb Jordan, the base commander, retired and Tony was moved to replace him. I was named the new DCO, and
a Colonel Art Laehr was designated to be my assistant. I didn’t know Art, or where he would be coming from, but it hardly mattered. I was elated, especially so since I had anticipated being put on the chopping block along with every other colonel in the wing. This meant I got to be my own man. I was also responsible for retraining the crews according to my assessment of what had led to their abysmal performance in the ORI.

The facts as I saw them pointed to crew discipline, which in my view was below standard, a deficiency I placed at the feet of both Tony and the bomb squadron commander. He was a genial Southerner, beloved by his subordinates, but in my view incapable of being tough enough on them when it was called for. He always had an excuse or rationalization for bad behavior or poor performance. His counterpart in the tanker squadron was more mature and settled in his leadership role, and his people reflected his calm, firm approach to business. They had acquitted themselves well during the ORI, putting the onus for failure squarely on the B-52 crews. It was impossible not to like their commander. However, his style of leadership and display of what struck me as veiled condescension toward my thin SAC experience fueled my determination to insert myself into the day-to-day running of his squadron.

My first day on the job, I brought in the staff and gave them a no-nonsense presentation on what I intended to do to get us ready for the retake of the ORI. Over the next few weeks, I reshuffled some of the division heads, paired the strongest pilots with the weakest radar navigators, and grilled the crews mercilessly on the low-level route they would fly. I also weeded out the inept and the incorrigibles who had been getting a free ride. The nation was two years into President Carter’s term, and the morose national mood, infused with antipathy for the military, was having a deleterious effect on the quality and morale of men and women in uniform. I found myself dealing with AWOLs, drug problems, and lack of commitment to the values I held dear, not to mention peaceniks at the front gate who cursed and spit on the guards and condemned our mission. This was a low period in our nation’s history and for its military forces, especially Strategic Air Command, which bore the brunt of the President’s and the public’s disdain. Carter cancelled the B-1 bomber program, the future of SAC’s manned deterrent, and slashed the defense budget. The command’s purpose was called into question, and its facilities neglected. Its bases fell into terrible disrepair, jeopardizing billions of dollars of investment and eroding this proud organization’s sense of professionalism. The crowning blow for me was the taking of American hostages in Tehran and the subsequent failed rescue mission in the desert of Iran, a national disgrace and military tragedy that left me sad and in low spirits. This was not a good time.
to be in uniform. For the second time in my career, the first coming after the confrontation with General Pustay, I contemplated resigning my commission and taking up some other path in life. What dissuaded me was the leadership challenge of turning around the flying operation at Griffiss, a challenge that was greatly aided by the arrival of my new assistant, Colonel Art Laehr. Art was a godsend. He was senior to me in years and time in grade, had 5,000 hours of B-52 flying time, was good natured with an infectious laugh, and fell easily into harness. We had perfect chemistry and quickly figured out the best use of our respective talents. I turned over the preparations for the ORI retake to Art, letting him focus on the nuts and bolts, while I got my arms around the morale and attitude of the crew force.

About a month into my new job, Dorene and I were treated to a surprise visit by General and Mrs. Brown. He had retired on the first of October, and they were en route to a favorite fishing hideaway in upstate New York. Skip called to ask Dorene to pick up a few things for her at the Base Exchange, in advance of coming by for a quiet visit, as if such a thing was possible. I discreetly advised Dick Kiefer, who remained his unflappable self and alerted the appropriate agencies to the arrival of our distinguished guests. We were delighted to see them, but were shocked to see the decline in General Brown’s health, having been in their company just a few weeks before at a small dinner gathering of family and close friends to celebrate his forthcoming retirement. That occasion was wonderfully memorable, highlighted for me when I was called on by the evening’s host, General Willy Y. Smith, to lighten a mood that had turned a bit too maudlin for General Brown’s taste. General Smith, a brilliant man who had long been in the Browns’ inner circle, asked me to begin a round of storytelling, and the first thing that popped into my head was the tennis match with Admiral McCain. When I got to the infamous line, “God damn it, Lee, we’re on the same team,” the audience howled. General Brown loved the anecdote. It put a grace note on an intimate, loving gathering, and an exclamation point on our friendship.

The Browns’ visit to Griffiss allowed us a few additional private minutes, the last we would spend together. General Brown died of cancer two months later, a premature end to an extraordinary career that had been badly tarnished by a series of unfortunate remarks in his closing days as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The first episode, in which he decried the British Armed Forces as “a collection of admirals and bands,” was said in a fit of pique over a NATO manning issue. The second, insinuating that Jews had inordinate influence over the nation’s banks and newspapers, was far more egregious and damaging. The ensuing public outcry and the stress it imposed accelerated his
physical decline and early demise.

Shortly after the Browns departed, we were tasked to re-fly the ORI route, this time with great success. Dorene gathered the families in bleachers to cheer the take-off, the crews responded magnificently, the heat was off, and the wing’s stock was much improved. I felt sufficiently confident in Art Laehr to take a week of leave in California with Dorene, where we celebrated J.O. and Veda’s 50th wedding anniversary and witnessed a renewal of their marriage vows. If ever there were a perfect union of man and woman, this was surely it.

Come January of 1979, I was comfortable enough in my new command to entertain the thought of making it my career home. Although I did not know the new CINC, General Ellis, Dorene had met and earned the respect of his wife, Peg, while serving on the Officers’ Wives Club board in Washington during my Pentagon tour. Peg had a powerful influence on her husband. She was smart, knew her business, loved SAC, paid attention to everything, and spoke her mind unreservedly. I don’t know for a fact but strongly suspect she had a hand in my elevation at Griffiss after the failed inspection, because of her admiration for Dorene and desire to put her into a leadership role as well. With this kind of support, I could see an outcome, if things continued to go well in the DCO position, where I might progress along a course to vice and then wing commander within the next two to three years. And then fate struck again, this time in the guise of a phone call from Colonel Sam Westbrook, the same brilliant young officer who had been in my squadron at the Academy and in XOXS at the Pentagon. It was, he informed me, in not quite so many words, get even time.

Sam had not forgotten that I had fingered him six months earlier when the good folks at the Colonels Assignment Branch tried to pull me back to the building to set up a new office, called the Chief’s Staff Group, to be manned by six or seven handpicked officers who would serve as a brain trust for the Air Force front office hierarchy – the Chief of Staff, his four-star Vice Chief, and three-star Assistant Vice Chief. This would have meant leaving SAC, and my treasured assignment in operations, after less than a year, the kiss of death as far as I was concerned. I was let off the hook only after offering up Sam Westbrook as an alternative the new Chief of Staff, General Lew Allen, might accept. Happily, he loved Sam, as I was certain he would, and I skated but only for a year. Sam got the Staff Group up and running, but had negotiated a one-year deal so he could attend the National War College, where he had been heading when diverted to head the Staff Group. The one-year term was up and there was no room for negotiation. I was given a date to report to General
Allen for an interview, no ifs, ands or buts.

The date turned out to be in mid-January. Dorene and I drove the Impala down to Arlington, dropped the kids off with the Huths, and took a room at the Twin Bridges Marriott, the same establishment we had deemed too expensive at twenty dollars a night sixteen years earlier. The weather was turning miserable, and the nation’s capital was under siege by hundreds of farmers protesting proposed cuts in farm subsidies. They had made the trek from all points of the compass, mounted on an army of tractors which they employed to block key roadways and create general chaos. With no taxis available, I mushed my way to the Pentagon on foot through the mounting drifts and reported for my interview.

I stopped by first to talk with Sam Westbrook, who filled me in a bit on General Allen’s background. He was a most unlikely Chief of Staff, ascending to the position through a highly unorthodox path. A 1946 West Point graduate, he attended pilot training and then spent a few early years in strategic bombers before entering graduate school, where he earned a master’s and doctorate in nuclear physics. The ensuing years found him in and out of the nuclear laboratory at Los Alamos, in the Special Projects world in Los Angeles and in the Pentagon, and then positions of increasing rank and responsibility in the Air Force space and national intelligence arenas, including being the highly regarded director of the National Security Agency. He was promoted to full general in August of 1977 and headed up Air Force Systems Command until he was named the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff in April of the following year. When General Dave Jones moved up to replace General Brown as Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff that summer, General Allen was selected to become the Air Force Chief of Staff, having barely one year in grade as a four-star and having never commanded an operational unit. All of the more likely contenders had fallen out of favor for one reason or another, and Allen was the preferred choice of the cerebral Secretary of Defense, Dr. Harold Brown, and the new Air Force Secretary, Dr. Hans Mark, both nuclear physicists, and both well acquainted with General Allen’s powerful intellect.

My interview with him was brief and unremarkable. He was quite unlike any general officer I had ever met, modest to a fault, shy almost, very soft-spoken and disarmingly candid. He didn’t have much to say about the role of the Staff Group, although he was clearly pleased with whatever Sam had been doing. We seemed to hit it off, and I left with the sense that my move to replace Sam was a foregone conclusion. That premonition was heightened when I realized that the Assistant Vice Chief of Staff was Lieutenant General Marion Boswell, a former AOC at the Air Force Academy, whom I had known.
for many years, and who thought well of me. The stamp of approval arrived shortly after our return to Griffiss, a day later than planned, it turned out. We had not been able to get out of the hotel parking when the snow stopped, nor could the employees get to work. Fortunately, many had remained overnight and, being trapped along with the guests, they were able to provide some services. They kept everyone fed until the roads were finally cleared, courtesy of the self-same tractor drivers who now became angels of mercy.

Word of my impending assignment, which would not actually be effective until the first of July, spread like wildfire and was not greeted with universal enthusiasm, especially, I would later learn, at SAC Headquarters where the CINC, General Ellis, and his wife were miffed that one of their star colonels was being plucked from the command without so much as a by-your-leave. As Peg Ellis would later sniff to Dorene, “We were going to make Lee a wing commander,” a commitment General Ellis would later renew when he allowed me back into SAC just before his retirement. But, not before he and my new boss-in-waiting had one of the most bruising confrontations in the history of the Air Force, not over me fortunately, but involving the fate of two future weapon systems that would both play a major role in my career.

The remainder of my brief tour as DCO was for the most part a joy. Colonel Dick Kiefer was reassigned, and replaced by Colonel Harry Rudolph, a steady, good-humored man with a charming wife, Liz. Relations with maintenance were on an even keel, crew training proceeded apace, the weather was abominable but the skiing was excellent, and the children were reasonably happy in school. Lisa was awarded the accolade “Most Christian Girl” by her demanding Catholic teachers. They both smiled through their tears at our insistence that they join us for Thanksgiving and Christmas meals at the alert facility with the troops and their families. As a family, we also participated in a community program to visit elderly shut-ins over the Christmas holidays, a sobering but gratifying experience. Dorene staged a fabulous “Follies” for the Officers Wives Club that won wide participation by women and men alike, and brought the audience to their feet for number after number.

The focal point of my business was preparing for the spring “Buy None,” a mini-ORI exercise in which the aircraft were generated and a “virgin” (not previously practiced) route was flown, but the IG and his team were not on the base. I spent hours with the bomber squadron, which had undergone a change in leadership after the ORI retake. The squadron commander had departed and was replaced by one of the strangest people I had ever met, a tall, well built, former jock with a high-pitched, raspy voice and no people skills. He was all about management, with voluminous books for every known task.
Respectful to a fault, but oddly distant and aloof, he was someone with whom I could never get comfortable. His people were performing well, so I cut him some slack, a confidence that was undermined by his bizarre behavior following a successful “Buy None” exercise. Each of the bomber, tanker and maintenance squadrons traditionally threw a unit party after these events, presuming the results warranted. While Dorene and the new wing commander’s wife, Liz, were making the rounds, they learned that the DCM, Colonel Jim Crabb, and the tanker squadron commander, Colonel Ron Gray, had tried to drop in on the bomb squadron party and been turned away. The squadron commander had told them they were not welcome, that the party was “closed to outsiders.” Liz and Dorene immediately headed for the bomb squadron where they were similarly barred. Liz, now furious, called her husband and Dorene alerted me. Harry Rudolf and I arrived at the same time and sailed into the bomb squadron with all guns blazing. When the commander confirmed the story, I asked him if the four of us were also “outsiders,” for which he had no answer. I told him to open the party to all comers and to be in my office the next morning. At that meeting, I told him in blunt terms what I thought about his judgment, underscoring that he was on thin ice with me, and ordered him to get his butt down the hill and apologize to Jim Crabb, Ron Gray, and their people.

Winter lingered, one of the worst on record, with prolonged sub-zero temperatures, including the entire month of January of 1979 and mountains of snow. I watched the weather and the runway like a hawk and tracked every training mission from take-off to recovery. One evening during blizzard conditions, I was alarmed to see only one snow plow clearing the runway and went immediately to see the civilian who managed this fleet of expensive, high-demand vehicles. As he sat drinking coffee, he informed me he was short of drivers and money and didn’t want to pay overtime, at which point I exploded and said, “Either get a driver in here or I will take the damn plow out myself.” Taking a page from my successful face-off with a Parisian truck driver, I climbed into the cab, at which point budget concerns were trumped by fear of my actually making good on my threat. Not willing to test my determination, he relented, brought in the on-call driver, and the next day went whining to his boss, to no avail. He fully supported me, testimony to the fact that by now I had earned the respect of all of my contemporaries. I accorded each of them great courtesy, to include an invitation to the alert facility to talk with the crews about how their organizations supported the flying mission and to tell war stories about their careers. Dorene and I had gotten to know all of them and their wives, an effort that paid off in good will and responsiveness to the flying mission.
As spring arrived, our thoughts turned more frequently to the upcoming move. We decided that Dorene would visit Virginia to look at the housing and school situation, with a view to balancing our finances against commuting distance and decent educational opportunities for the kids. She found a perfect fit in a new townhouse development called River Farms, located in Alexandria some twenty minutes from the Pentagon and five minutes from fine middle and high schools. The units were just under one hundred thousand dollars, a price we could handle with our savings, a VA loan and the prevailing interest rate. We put down the requisite two thousand dollars to hold a unit and signed a contract confirming our intention to buy. The projected completion date was mid-June, which fit our needs perfectly.

Our final few days were uneventful, marked most memorably by the farewell party organized by the DCO complex, a dinner attended by friends from the base and community. The theme of the evening was “Butler’s Last Stand,” a parody of General Custer’s disastrous last battle. The event was a roast, giving the troops a chance to get even with any and every one they had found wanting. After the meal, the players took their places in a setting designed to parody my infamous Friday staff meetings where I spent four hours going over every aspect of the DCO business. As the lights came up on stage, the audience delighted at the sight of teenager Brett sitting at the head of the conference room table playing the role of his all-too-youthful colonel father. What followed was hilarious, with Brett’s fellow players feeding him line after line which he hit out of the park. My favorite was his observation that the bomb squadron commander was “the kind of a guy who would take popcorn to a funeral,” which brought down the house.

The skit was followed by a round of gift giving, all of which were thoughtful and memorable. The head of the hospital gave me a proctoscope which had been modified as a jigger and stirrer and mounted on a base bearing the acronym, FOATA – “From One Asshole To Another.” From the Gunners came a “Bulldog” plaque (their mascot), inscribed on the back: “Colonel Butler can tell you to go to Hell so persuasively, you actually look forward to the trip.” My favorite was a clock fashioned from a highly polished section of a tree trunk, on which the hours were represented by an insignia for each rank I had held and each rating I had earned dating back to my cadet days. It was a wonderful night, filled with camaraderie and love, surrounded by family and friends, one we will cherish always.

As we started the packing process, we got some unsettling news: the new townhouse would not be ready as promised. There would be at least a month’s delay before we could close the deal. That meant our household goods would
have to go into storage, and Dorene and the kids would have to spend some
time in Hemet, which they were glad to do although it meant another long
drive back and forth across the country. I couldn’t afford to rent a room for the
duration, so I prevailed on a friend in D.C. who took me in for what I thought
would be a brief stay.

I left Griffiss with mixed emotions, happy about having renewed my op-
erational credentials, but uncertain about my future in SAC, which I was loath
to leave. Moreover, I was going to a job where success would depend on keep-
ing a triumvirate of bosses happy and not letting my six-man brain trust get
crosswise with a bevy of general officer staff heads, who, I was told, saw the
group as a nuisance at best and a threat at worst. I was about to become some
amalgamation of Generals Jasper Welch and John Pustay.
As the title suggests, I now lean heavily on the remarkable officer and longtime colleague who would succeed me in the role recounted here, one who knew—and recalled—this history better than I and whose editing fingerprints are on every page of this retrospective. Ted passed away shortly before these pages went to the publisher, but here I shall speak of him as I always knew him: vibrantly alive.

Ted would have agreed that Washington in the summer of 1979 was not a happy place. The weather was hot and humid, and the political climate was even more miserable. The economy was entering a tailspin dubbed “stagflation” that would drive interest rates to unheard-of levels over the coming months, choking off demand and devastating the business community. U.S.-Soviet relations were at a low ebb and would sink even lower a few months later with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The balance of military power appeared to be shifting inexorably in favor of the East, as Russia introduced a number of major new military systems. President Carter’s dark read of the American mood—a “national malaise”—and Puritanical hectoring from the Oval Office only deepened the national funk. We seemed to have lost our way in the world, with no driving vision, weak leadership and our mortal enemy apparently bent on expanding its influence at our expense in South Asia and the Horn of Africa.

The atmosphere in the Pentagon was even more morose and corrosive. Our military forces had suffered debilitating physical, intellectual and emotional body blows in Vietnam and its aftermath. The Army was in ruins, struggling to reinvent itself as an all-volunteer force, while facing public antipathy and severe budget cuts that were creating, in the memorable words of General Edward “Shy” Meyer, a “hollow Army.” The Navy and Marines were professing to be in equally dire straits, and the Air Force was struggling with staggering
problems – deteriorating facilities, sagging morale, and aging weapon systems whose replacement would require hugely expensive modernization programs. The Air Force needed strong, united and decisive leadership from the top. Alas, its senior leaders – the Chief, Vice Chief, and the four-star community – were far from agreed on how to reconcile these competing priorities, leaving the service without firm direction. The recently appointed Chief of Staff, General Lew Allen, was climbing a steep learning curve, while bearing the additional burden of not only emotion-laden objections, but in some cases thinly veiled derision from a handful of the four-stars who dismissed him as an intellectual without the credentials of combat experience or command of a wing.

He was no better served by some of the key Air Staff three-star deputies who had their own agendas for how to proceed and, in some cases, direct channels to Congressional power brokers. I was appalled by this state of affairs and concluded that, if the Chief’s Staff Group was to serve any useful purpose, it would have to tackle this complex situation head-on. But first, I had to get the team appropriately manned and organized, earn the confidence of my three front-office bosses, build relationships with action officers throughout the Air Staff, learn the current state of play, and then quietly work General Allen’s agenda with a network of trusted agents.

My first meeting with the Staff Group did not fill me with optimism. After jumping through the in-processing hoops, it was late in the day before I had a chance to sit down with them. Colonel Sam Westbrook had put together a six-man shop (including himself) the previous summer but two members had just transferred, leaving me with three: my former colleague from the Air Force Academy Political Science Department, Lieutenant Colonel Ted Warner; Lieutenant Colonel Walt Kross, a tall, lanky pilot from the airlift and fighter worlds; and Major Gary Clark, a non-rated personnel and manpower specialist. I asked them to give me a rundown on how the Staff Group functioned, and the picture was not altogether clear. Each member supported the Chief and the Vice Chief in a particular area, maintaining contact with action officers, as well as transmitting information from the senior leaders to the staff and vice versa. Supporting the Chief in his appearances before the Congress and writing speeches were also high-priority tasks. The latter was particularly demanding and time consuming, requiring a lot of face-time with our two principals. While most of these speeches were perfunctory, presented to friendly audiences, some were of utmost import to Air Force policy and priorities. On that score, the ball was squarely in General Allen’s court, and he obviously needed help. I took on that task, with able assistance from Ted when the subject involved his specialties: the Soviet Union, U.S. nuclear forces, and strategic arms control.
Otherwise, the guys seemed to have carte blanche to work whatever issues they chose within their areas of expertise and responsibility. Ted was close to General Allen, often traveling with him and supporting him on two major fronts: helping the Carter Administration to convince the Senate to ratify the recently-signed SALT II agreement and determining a physically-survivable and politically-acceptable basing mode for the M-X intercontinental ballistic missile. Whatever guidance the Staff Group received appeared to come from Lieutenant General Marion Boswell, whose principal concern—that they not get crosswise with the Air Staff—constrained thinking outside the box. However, his concern was understandable, in that he handled the vast majority of the daily business generated by the Air Staff and thus was first in the line of fire when things went off the rails. The Vice Chief, General Hill, was acerbic, smart as hell, and had little use for the Staff Group. However, he was fiercely loyal to the Chief, always ready to take a bullet for him or to face down a bevy of mutinous four-star commanders in the field.

I began by calling on the three-star directors of the major functional organizations in the Air Staff, letting them know there had been a change in leadership of the Staff Group and trying to draw them out as to how they saw its role. The responses ranged from cordial to disdainful, the latter from Lieutenant General Abbott Greenleaf, the Deputy Chief of Staff (DCS) for Programs and Resources. General Greenleaf was a decidedly mixed bag. He had encyclopedic knowledge of the Air Force, having mastered the detail of hundreds of programs and units; and he was responsible for arraying annually the thousands of Air Force program line items in a priority that would ostensibly allow an intelligent marriage of planning and budgeting. However, his brilliance was severely dimmed by a strong affinity for alcohol and an incapacity to treat people with dignity and respect. In that era, such personal failings among senior officers, especially those in key positions with powerful sponsors, were too often tolerated. In General Greenleaf’s case, those sponsors included the chairmen of the Congressional committees that controlled Pentagon funding; consequently, he was nigh untouchable.

Other DCSs were more receptive to my role, particularly Lieutenant General Charlie Gabriel, who headed Plans and Operations, and Lieutenant General Kelly Burke, who headed Research and Development. Burke was Greenleaf’s intellectual equal, his match as a bureaucratic player within the Pentagon, and his polar opposite in manner and personality. The DCS Personnel, Lieutenant General Andy Iosue, was by nature combative and bureaucratically clever enough to have placed Gary Clark in the Staff Group. Finally, to my consternation, Major General George Keegan, who had presided over intelligence at 7th
Air Force in Vietnam during General George Brown’s tenure as commander, was now heading Air Force Intelligence. Still his arrogant, overbearing self, General Keegan presented a very touchy problem. He intensely disliked and distrusted Ted Warner, whose reporting on Soviet military affairs during his tour in Moscow as an assistant air attaché was insufficiently critical of the Soviets for Keegan’s taste. He had dubbed him “Ted the Red” and was now outraged by Ted’s appointment to the high-profile Staff Group.

Given this Byzantine setting, I proceeded cautiously, picking issues carefully and selectively vetting our work with the Air Staff. These sticky wickets in my professional life were echoed on the home front, where Dorene and I were faced with an increasingly worrisome delay in the completion of our Alexandria townhouse. As the summer wore on, with the start of school fast approaching, we still had no closing date. Finally, we were forced into the position of having her drive back from Hemet to take up temporary residence in an apartment building close enough to River Farms to allow the kids to start class in the associated school district. This was an expensive and inconvenient option, but it bought us enough time to find a better one. Thanks to Dorene’s perseverance, she found a townhouse available for month-to-month lease just a few blocks away from where our place was being constructed. Much relieved, we moved to our interim lodging on Dr. Craik Court (Craik was George Washington’s physician) in mid-September.

Our transient home was adequate but hardly cozy; hoping for a short stay, we left much of our stuff in boxes in the basement. Meanwhile, Dorene kept daily tabs on the progress down the street, made friends with the foreman and talked him out of a key, a maneuver that proved prescient. As the townhouse neared completion, our contractor remained silent about closing, and we began to suspect that he was working a hidden agenda. A closer reading of our contract revealed a clause in the fine print providing that, if the townhouse was not “substantially complete” within one year of the signing, the builder could cancel the deal. With local home values on the rise, that was clearly to his advantage. Our concern and anxiety were further heightened by an accelerating rise in interest rates, which by November had hit double digits with no end in sight. Although we had arranged a VA loan, which was somewhat less sensitive to the rate rise, there were dozens of other buyers who were stuck with conventional mortgages. Should the contractor get away with taking back these properties in order to sell them at a premium over the original asking price, the double whammy of a steeper price and more expensive loan would push many of them out of the River Farms development.

In December, smack in the middle of this family crisis, the Soviets created
Chief, Staff Group (1979 – 1981)

a firestorm by launching a bolt-from-the-blue invasion of Afghanistan. Coming on the heels of the revolution in Iran, this bold maneuver put America in a seemingly perilous position. (Our botched hostage rescue attempt in Iran a few months later added to the sense of gloom.) It felt like the national wheels were coming off, with worst-case scenarios envisioning a Russian sweep into Iran, threatening Western access to Middle East oil and setting the stage for a major conflict between the Superpowers. The Pentagon was, on the one hand, galvanized by the prospect, but, on the other, daunted by the fact of our woefully inadequate presence in the area and lack of planning for war in this theater of operations.

I decided that the Staff Group was not adequately manned to deal with the tasks ahead. We needed to devise an agenda for the Chief that spelled out in clear, priority terms the needs of the Air Force, and to play a strong role in his responsibilities as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That would require Staff Group expertise in joint operations, especially in the Middle East, and in dealing with a broad coalition of partners from the region as well as from Europe. With Ted already handling matters Soviet and strategic nuclear, and Gary fully engaged with people issues, I first expanded Walt’s portfolio to include all non-strategic missions and systems. Then I went to General Boswell with a request to hire another former colleague from the Air Force Academy Political Science Department, Lieutenant Colonel Roy Stafford, then with the U.S. staff at NATO Headquarters, to deal with trans-Atlantic relations, and a fast-charging lieutenant colonel named Denny Scarborough from the Joint Staff, who would bring us expertise in joint doctrine and warfighting. Denny would also prove invaluable in keeping us engaged in actions underway to improve U.S. military plans and presence in the Persian Gulf region. For my part, I would continue to work on the key elements of the Air Force agenda and backstop the rest of the team as required.

General Boswell agreed with the plan and I was off and running. The first order of business was to create a new stump speech that would put General Allen’s stamp on a new direction for the Air Force and the priorities essential to achieving its most vital objectives. In framing the speech, I first underscored three critical modernization programs, which I dubbed M-X, B-X and C-X, short-hand for the next-generation ICBM, strategic bomber and transport aircraft. I then stressed the need to recapitalize aging base facilities and concluded with an appeal to better support the troops, our most important resource. From a mission perspective, the M-X and B-X arguments were driven by advances in Soviet systems. Equally important, they were calculated to bring the full weight of the Chief’s office to bear on the increasingly contentious issue of
survivable M-X basing and on the equally sensitive question of whether to play it safe in choosing the successor to the B-52, or to make a breathtaking technological leap to a new, stealthy B-X platform. The M-X missile was a hydra-headed goliath envisioned for deployment in a novel mobile basing mode to offset the increased accuracy of a new family of Soviet ICBMs. The particular basing scheme initially conceived – a cluster of hardened shelters among which each M-X was to be hidden in a sort of shell game – entailed an array of complex and politically volatile issues, from reliability and security to a huge demand for public land. The ensuing outcry compelled a search for other approaches which had, incredibly, grown to thirty-three. Among them were such bizarre options as launch from an aircraft and deep underground burial in vaults from which the missile transporter would burrow its way to the surface in the aftermath of a nuclear attack. The M-X had become a laughing-stock in Washington and beyond and was in danger of being canceled through weight of sheer absurdity.

The bomber question was even more hotly debated, inside and outside the Air Force. Internally, the fight was between the CINCSAC, General Richard Ellis, and the Air Staff, including the Chief. Ellis wanted to “stretch” an existing medium range-bomber, the FB-111, to increase its range, allowing it to serve as a relatively inexpensive near-term solution while betting on technology to produce a fleet of “stealthy” aircraft that would replace both the B-52 and the modified FB-111s. General Allen believed that the advantage of this option was outweighed by the risk of delaying a more rapid solution, as well as the possible failure of stealth technology. Having headed Air Force Systems Command, he was familiar with the risks associated with leaps in technology and had at hand a ready option: resurrecting the B-1 heavy bomber, which had been cancelled by President Carter in 1977. He favored buying 100 B-1Bs while undertaking additional developmental efforts to ensure that a stealthy follow-on bomber was fully ready for production. Under the Chief’s approach, the B-1B would bolster a smaller but upgraded B-52 force for decades to come.

While ICBM capability was important to SAC, bombers were its essence, the very heart of its history and at the top of its priorities. This was a fight over the crown jewels of the command, and the commander was very upset that his wishes were being challenged and his judgment questioned. General Ellis enlisted the support of two powerful figures, General Alton Slay, the head of Air Force Systems Command, and General Dutch Huyser, my Air Staff three-star boss in 1974 and a SAC veteran now in charge of the Military Airlift Command. This triumvirate mounted a vociferous campaign whose sharp elbows were evident in correspondence to the Chief to which I was privy. Some of the
language was so disrespectful and so incensed General Hill that he offered to
go to SAC Headquarters and confront General Ellis on the matter. But, as al-
ways, General Allen remained a gentleman and would have none of it. He was
so secure in his reasoning and so comfortable in his own skin that he held his
tongue, content to make his case for the B-1 solution with the new Pentagon
leadership installed by President Reagan. My self-appointed job was to help
him make his case, publicly and privately, which meant taking on General Ellis
— my prospective future employer. Damn.

The C-X, which eventually became the C-17, was the Air Force’s concept
of a new airlifter to replace the aging work-horse C-141A that I had flown in
my MAC days. Despite its sturdy airframe, the fleet was showing signs of dete-
rioration from relentless use. Moreover, the Army was producing new genera-
tions of fighting vehicles that would require a much larger cargo plane to be
moved from stateside bases to prospective theaters of conflict. While the size
of the proposed aircraft was imposing, it could land on primitive airstrips near
the front lines. Further, it could turn on a dime and back up with ease, allowing
a larger number of transports to be parked in a given area. The concept had
generated huge controversy, including doubts about its ability to survive in a
hostile environment and its capacity to move sufficient numbers of armored
vehicles quickly to a fast-moving crisis.

All of these programs needed to be better defined and justified, a role the
Staff Group took on with a vengeance, working with the key nodes in the devel-
opment chain and assisting General Allen to make the case to decision-makers
in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. Ultimately, thanks to the military build-up
under President Reagan, the M-X became the ten-warhead Peacekeeper ICBM,
50 of which were deployed in fixed, hardened underground silos. The B-X
evolved to a modern rendition of the flying wing: the stealthy B-2, whose de-
ployment was delayed until the early 1990s while 100 B-1Bs were added to the
bomber force during the preceding decade. This sequence proved extremely
costly for the B-2A program. By the time it reached full-scale production, the
Cold War had ended, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and Congressional fund-
ing cuts forced the Air Force to curtail the fleet to 21 from the 132 planes
originally envisioned. As regards the C-X, thanks largely to Walt Kross and his
collaboration with Secretary Mark and the Air Staff, Congress was persuaded
to support a large fleet of these versatile aircraft. Designated the C-17, they
are today the mainstay of the Air Mobility Command.

The Staff Group also assisted in building a persuasive case to fund pro-
grams to halt the erosion of critical infrastructure and to enhance the qual-
ity of life of people in the Air Force. God bless General Allen’s wife, Barbara,
who personally took on the issue of improving the lot of Air Force families. She formed a committee of military women and spouses of Air Force officers and enlisted members to address the most distressing issues and recommend solutions. Dorene was privileged to be among this group, testimony to her reputation as an empathetic advocate for the Air Force family. From this dedicated group of volunteers emerged the concept of “Air Force Family Support Centers,” facilities that would consolidate access to support services scattered across several base organizations. Dubbed the Air Force Spouse Issues Team, they worked hand-in-glove with the Air Staff, fleshing out their proposals, estimating costs and building a constituency. With facts in hand, Barbara set up a formal meeting with her husband, made a first-rate presentation and won his support. Funding for the initiative was wedged into an already tight budget. It survived numerous challenges and eventually came to fruition on scores of Air Force installations. Here was an historic accomplishment, skillfully managed, that has served countless families.

On the home front, we were finally settled in our new townhouse, our first real home as a family. When we lost our monthly rental in early January of 1980, with the contractor still stalling on completion – very little was left to do – in desperation we took a high-risk step and simply moved in one weekend using the key Dorene had squirreled away months earlier. The builder was furious when he found out but, faced with a prolonged court battle over the squatter’s rights we had established under Virginia law, he quickly caved and closed on the contract. Being charter members of the River Farms community was a treat, one we relished more and more as we put our personal touch on our three-story abode. I willed myself back to a regular exercise program and became even more focused at work, where the expanded role of the Staff Group was beginning to roil the waters far and wide. My first blowup involved the Air Staff and its most vociferous member: Abbott Greenleaf.

Walt Kross came to my office, shut the door, and told me he had it on unimpeachable authority that General Greenleaf was double-dealing on the Hill, talking the party line on a major Air Force program publicly but working to kill it behind the scenes. This was, of course, highly unethical and disloyal to the Chief. After reflection, I decided to take the matter to General Hill, since it was well above my pay grade. The Vice Chief loved to needle General Greenleaf anyway, so I had no doubt he would personally set things right. Wrong. No sooner had I put the facts in front of him than he whirled around to his phone, punched the direct line to General Greenleaf, gave him a cursory ass chewing, and said, “Butler is on the way to your office to fill in the blanks. Pay attention.” Then he turned back to me with a wicked grin and said, “If I were you,
I’d be there in the next thirty seconds.” Horrified, I sprinted down the hall and into Greenleaf’s outer office where he stood waiting. “Butler,” he growled in a voice shaking with anger, “I’ll see you here tonight at seven o’clock,” walked into his private chambers and slammed the door. “Welcome,” said his executive officer, “to Vespers.”

I arrived at the appointed hour and was ushered into General Greenleaf’s office, where I sat like a bump on a log for the next thirty minutes without the slightest acknowledgement. He continued to work through the mountain of paperwork on his desk, studiously ignoring my presence and sipping occasionally from a tea cup that appeared to be housed in a drawer to the left of his chair. I thought little of it until I realized that, out of my view, he had refilled the cup several times without benefit of a teapot. The actual nature of his refreshment soon became obvious in his increasingly slurred speech and reddened eyes. When he finally put away his pen and turned his attention to me, he launched into a soliloquy that would consume the next hour and a half. It began with a primer on the complexities of his position, the trials and tribulations of arbitrating among myriad competitors for limited resources, and tracking the details of hundreds of programs. As the hour grew later, the “tea” flowed more freely, and this pity party evolved to a diatribe about the Staff Group, ending with a pointed personal attack on its present leader. After asserting that he was on to my real role, spying on the Air Staff, and on him in particular, he rose unsteadily to his feet, leaned precariously over the desk, and delivered a direct threat to my career, to be carried out the moment General Allen retired from service. Having thus unburdened himself, he fell back into his chair in a drunken stupor and I took my leave. Glancing back over my shoulder as I exited the reception area, I saw the executive officer gently tending to his mentor, closing the bar for the evening.

I kept the sad and discomfiting incident to myself, chalking it up to the price of poker in this high-stakes budget game. By now I was sufficiently toughened to scurrilous behavior by the occasional high-ranking figure not to get rattled by it, even when I was in the crosshairs. I took the confrontation as a cautionary tale. Should the opportunity come, I vowed never to let the pressures and temptations that attend great responsibility erode my values or my humanity.

As the Afghanistan crisis mounted, I focused the Staff Group on two goals: helping the Air Staff gear up for the possibility of a Soviet incursion into the Middle East, and working on core organization and modernization issues that would define the long-term capabilities of the Air Force. I detailed Denny Scarborough to the ops community in XOO, which had created a new office
called *Checkmate*. Its charter was to become expert in the strategic aspects of the Persian Gulf region, divine possible Soviet invasion schemes, and game the employment of American and allied forces to thwart them. That required an understanding of the joint arena that was largely lacking in the Air Staff, indeed throughout the Air Force. I assigned Denny the delicate task of becoming a trusted agent for all parties engaged in the contingency planning taking place both in the Pentagon and in the field. His broader mission was to educate, facilitate dialogue and promote interservice cooperation; it was a heavy-duty responsibility, one he handled brilliantly.

Roy Stafford worked the NATO side of the street while Ted filtered the confusing flood of intelligence on Soviet intentions and capabilities. Walt took on thorny organizational and programmatic issues, leading off with groundbreaking work on the structure of the nation’s air defense architecture. He next dove into a nasty fight between the Air Force and a handful of civilian analysts in the Office of the Secretary of Defense over the issue of fighter modernization. This is a story worth telling, as it speaks both to the nature of the times and the enduring tension between the military services and some of their civilian masters.

Air Force Vietnam-era fighters, missiles and munitions were aging, some simply worn out, and needed to be replaced lest the U.S. lose its edge over what we knew would emerge from extant Soviet fighter development programs. That prompted a “Third Generation Fighter Modernization” initiative, a two-pronged approach that envisioned a “high end” aircraft for the air superiority role teamed with a less costly “low end” plane equipped for both air-to-air combat and air-to-ground attack. The first would feature a more modern radar as well as an armament suite comprised of the “fire and forget” Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM, or AIM-120) and the AIM-9L infrared missile. The more versatile but cheaper plane would be armed with an advanced air-to-air missile and the Maverick air-to-ground missile. Both aircraft would have a nose cannon and a common engine in the Pratt &Whitney F-100. As an historical note, the high-end fighter was designated the F-15 from the outset, while its companion was initially conceived in the context of the OSD-sponsored “Lightweight Fighter” competition which pitted two prototypes against one another. Ultimately, both prototypes served as the basis for mainstays of the nation’s tactical fighter-bomber force, the YF-16 as the Air Force’s F-16 and the YF-17 as the Navy’s F/A-18.

At this juncture, the Air Force’s approach to fighter modernization became known as the “High-Low Mix.” F-15s and F-16s would be procured in a roughly one-to-two ratio (730 to 1500), thus achieving higher numbers at a relatively
lower cost. There was, however, yet another tactical aircraft included in the modernization effort – the A-10. A modestly priced air-to-ground attack aircraft, the A-10 was optimized for destroying armored vehicles, most particularly tanks, employing a 30mm cannon that could fire a hail of rounds made from depleted uranium, capable of penetrating the densest armor of the era.

These three aircraft, with their advanced weaponry, represented the future of the Air Force fighter inventory for years to come, the core of an unmatched tactical airpower capability. Collectively, they were at the heart of Air Force procurement for what was envisioned as an eight-year acquisition program. However, both history and the times militated against fulfilling this vision. In the first instance, the traditional acquisition pattern for modern weapons systems was marked by extended procurements, stretching well over a decade, subject to continuing reductions in the size of the buy. That pitfall was exacerbated by the emergence of a crop of civilian strategists – in Congress, government, and the public at large – who took strong exception to these expensive and prolonged procurement programs and used every lever available to thwart them.

In the case at hand, just as the trio of Third Generation fighters reached critical funding thresholds, a small group of analysts in the Tactical Forces Division within the Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation (PA&E) challenged the Air Force construct across all of its elements as overly complex and likely to be unreliable in combat. They cited examples of poor performance in similar, earlier generation systems, the Sparrow radar-guided missile and the Navy’s costly F-14 with its widely criticized Phoenix missile. More telling were the early reliability numbers for the F-15 and its F-100 engine, both of which were stumbling in operational tests and evaluations.

In keeping with their charter as a staff element in the civilian bureaucracy serving the Secretary of Defense, the PA&E analysts proposed an alternative to the Air Force Third Generation programs, premised largely on the work of retired Air Force Colonel John Boyd, a charismatic former fighter pilot, who was sharply – and not altogether unjustifiably – critical of the capabilities of Vietnam-era aircraft and missiles. For the air superiority role, he and his colleagues championed what they called a truly lightweight fighter: a highly reliable, single-engine jet, armed with an equally reliable AIM-9L all-aspect, infrared-guided, air-to-air missile and a nose cannon, and powered by a General Electric F404 engine. This concept was, in reality, nothing more than a lightly modified variant of the existing Air Force F-5 fighter (later redesignated the F-20). Boyd and company’s core argument was that all air-to-air combat devolved to a visual, swirling melee, the classical dogfight from wars past. Air
Force thinking had by now progressed to what it perceived as a Beyond Visual Range (BVR) aerial battlespace of the future, where there would be a premium on early detection and longer-range engagement of enemy fighters, providing an unbeatable advantage to U.S. pilots.

With regard to air-to-ground operations, Boyd’s counterpart was Pierre Sprey, who strongly disparaged the Air Force’s performance in providing direct support to the ground forces during the Vietnam War. He saw no improvement in the F-16 and dismissed the A-10 as too big and lacking the maneuverability needed to survive an intensely hostile battlespace marked by the proliferation of surface-to-air missiles and mobile anti-aircraft artillery systems. Sprey’s alternative was the “blitz fighter,” a propeller-driven, lightly-armored plane similar to the German World War II Stuka dedicated to killing tanks and armored personnel carriers. The Air Force viewed this concept as a pipe dream, unsupported by data and unmindful of the air defenses already on the horizon.

The good news is that, at the end of the day, all of the Air Force alternatives were approved and procured – but over a very long period and, in the cases of the F-15 and A-10, in much smaller numbers than originally planned. The F-16 proved extraordinarily successful, thanks to advances in technology and foreign markets that found its versatility and relatively low cost very attractive. It also performed superbly in combat during the two Gulf Wars and the air war over Kosovo. But that latter-day success was far from secured at this juncture. Indeed, Walt Kross was deeply troubled by not only the PA&E alternatives, but also what he considered the unethical tactics being employed in the campaign to disparage the Air Force Third Generation Fighter Modernization program. The collision of positions and personalities became so intense that the group in PA&E petitioned the Deputy Secretary of Defense to direct General Allen to stop Walt’s involvement in the matter and reassign him from the Staff Group. I bluntly told the Chief that such a move was unacceptable and spelled out the danger posed to the future of Air Force tactical airpower by the PA&E alternatives. General Allen took all of this on board, praised Walt’s courageous efforts, and informed the Deputy Secretary of Defense that, given the importance of the issues, this tactical air modernization issue had moved to the top of his priority list and henceforth he would be personally engaged. That trumped the opposition in PA&E, signaling a major victory for the Staff Group.

As this drama was ending, a new player arrived in the Air Force front office. General Hill had reached mandatory retirement and was replaced by General Bob Mathis, a long-time friend of General Allen. He had grown up in the fighter business, earned a doctorate in Electrical Engineering, moved in and out of the systems development world, was a program director for the F-111 and the
F-15, and was pulled in as the Vice Chief in March of 1980. He was the polar opposite of General Hill, from his West Point education and advanced degrees, to his quiet, gentlemanly demeanor. Conversely, he had no Air Staff experience and had served less than a year in the Pentagon, in OSD.

General Hill had gradually developed closer ties with the Staff Group and he and I had a particularly good relationship. When I learned of his impending departure, I closeted myself for an afternoon and drafted a proposed retirement speech. It encapsulated the extraordinary global changes that had occurred during his thirty-seven years in uniform, outlined the impact of those changes on the Air Force, and speculated on what would be required of the nation and its armed forces in the years ahead. I liked the draft the moment it came out of the typewriter; to my immense satisfaction so did the Vice Chief. It would become the foundation for a speech I would give at the National War College ten years hence, one that would in turn become the departure point for a wholesale revision of United States military strategy in anticipation of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The remainder of 1980 was devoted to carrying out the ambitious charter I had assigned to the members of my talented team. They performed with great aplomb, growing in stature with the Air Staff and our front office. Additionally, my scope was expanded to include liaison with the Secretary of the Air Force, Dr. Hans Mark, a man of impressive intellect and academic achievement. After watching our operation for a year, he paid us the compliment of forming his own brain trust, choosing my Academy classmate Lou Hablas to head the group. I did my best to help Lou get up and running, but he was jumping a very high bar. By now, our shop was the gold standard for organizations of this type, subsequently created in other Air Force headquarters and within the combatant commands. It did not help my longtime friend that I had built a close relationship with Secretary Mark. He was a man of considerable intellectual curiosity and zeal who had his own notions about how the Air Force should look and perform. That created considerable tension with General Allen and the Air Staff, and it was not healthy. The strain was exacerbated by the equally strong intellect and assertive personality of Air Force Undersecretary Antonia Chayes, a Harvard-educated lawyer, who swept several issues into her in-box and generated animosity throughout the Air Force with her in-your-face style. She got on famously with Ted Warner and me, and I admired her forthrightness. That chemistry prompted General Allen to charge us with the role of intermediary between himself and Mark and Chayes. Eventually, we became the preferred channel of communications not only for the front office, but also for those senior Air Staff heads who disliked dealing with these two civilian masters.
Despite the urgency of the times, I settled into routines in my professional and personal life that were a welcome departure from my first Pentagon assignment, with its ad hoc demands generated by a stream of spontaneous firefights. One of those routines brought me to one of the odder incidents of my Pentagon years. My mornings began with a one-on-one with General Allen following his 8:00 a.m. staff meeting. As I sat daily on the couch just inside the door of his reception area waiting for the session to break, I could set my watch by the arrival of the first Pentagon public tour of the day, heralded by the spiel of the sharp enlisted men and women handpicked for this high-visibility duty. The tours, which had been instituted by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld during the bicentennial year of 1976, showcased for the public a number of exhibits on military history and capabilities situated throughout the Pentagon. The tours, each an entourage of some thirty visitors, departed hourly from the Concourse. Near the outset of their promenade, they were led through the Fourth Floor ‘E’ Ring corridor that housed the senior Air Force leadership.

One morning in June of 1980, the strict protocol of the tour was broken when a young woman suddenly detached herself from the group, burst into the Chief’s reception area and flung herself in a heap at the foot of the desk of his secretary, Ann Fletcher, where she began pleading to see General Allen. Dressed in an ankle-length skirt, a long-sleeve blouse and a shawl covering her shoulders, she clutched in her hands a plain brown bag of unknown contents. At this juncture, four of the five residents of the room, the Chief’s senior and assistant executive officers, an assistant secretary and I, began looking for cover. Ann, however, remained the picture of calm. She rose slightly from her chair, leaned over her desk and, while activating the silent alarm, informed the woman that General Allen’s morning schedule was too full to squeeze her in. On hearing that news, the distraught girl broke into hysterics, placed the brown bag on the front edge of Ann’s desk and to our relief pulled from it not an explosive device but rather what the French would call a baguette, a long sheath of hard crusted bread, which must have been intended as some sort of goodwill gift.

As Ann considered her next move, reinforcements arrived in the form of two Marine security guards, resplendent in their dress blues. One was tall and stocky, the second short and wiry, both most agitated by this violation of a senior officer’s privacy. Tall Marine informed the intruder in his best command voice that she must arise and leave the room immediately, her response being to collapse on the carpet and grab the bottom of the desk. Undeterred, Tall Marine bent over and gathered her up in his arms, at which point her left leg came off her body at the knee and fell with a thud to the floor. Short Marine,
panic-stricken, announced with a loud cry, “God damn, God damn, her leg came off.” Tall Marine swung his limp passenger to the side, took note of the detached limb, and said, “Well, pick it up, stupid,” whereupon Short Marine bent over, gathered it up in his arms, and the two of them marched from the room in single file with their respective burdens.

At that exact moment, the staff meeting adjourned; General Allen emerged and ambled across the room toward his office. Taking note of the shell-shocked looks greeting him along the way, he inquired of Ann what might be the matter. She replied that a visitor had broken away from the tour, barged into the front office, and demanded to see him, but the Marines had saved the day, although causing her leg to come off during the eviction process. Without missing a beat, General Allen replied, “Ann, I appreciate the firm response, but tearing an uninvited guest limb from limb was a bit over the top.” And with that, he disappeared into his chambers. Way too cool.

My life’s other routines were blessedly free from such disconcerting events. To the contrary, they were pleasant and rewarding. I often carpooled from Alexandria with Charlie Stebbins, Emilio Tavernise, now a River Farms neighbor, and Hector Negroni, who collected enough material to fill the thirty-minute drive with a fresh round of jokes every day. Family life was stable and content. Dorene joined with a longtime friend, Dorethea Johnson, to create two business ventures well suited to their talents. The first, The Dorene Butler Agency, provided speakers and workshop leaders for D.C. area conventions, civic organizations, and social clubs. The second, Hospitality America, offered innovative programs for spouses of conventioneers. She built a talented slate of presenters, put together high-quality brochures, and created a network of contacts throughout the Washington area. This was serious, responsible work requiring new skills and knowledge, and Dorene fully invested herself to ensure she did well by those who had signed on to her enterprises.

The children were happily ensconced in school. Lisa was at Stephen Foster Middle School, a short walk from River Farms, Brett, at Fort Hunt High. Both schools were superb, and our two scholars flourished. Lisa employed her singing skills in two school productions, and Brett was invited to a Harvard summer school program offering college-credit courses in Economics. He aced the course, outsinging a class full of bright students, many much older, and even served as a tutor for some. In January of 1981, that experience on his résumé helped earn him early acceptance to the University of California at Berkeley, high on his list of potential colleges, and an Air Force ROTC scholarship to boot. We were very proud of our son, who was blossoming into adulthood well ahead of his peers. He had found a soul mate in his girlfriend, Carrie, earned
a driver’s license, and won respect in a circle of gifted teachers and friends.

Cal Berkeley was not a slam dunk, given its reputation as a haven for radicals, hippies and anti-establishment rant. To test the waters, we decided that a campus visit would be prudent. Then fate intervened to make Berkeley even more attractive. General Allen acceded to my plea to be released from Staff Group duty and return to SAC. What I hoped would be a one-year tour had now passed the eighteen-month mark and I was increasingly eager to return to the field to compete for a wing commander slot. My delight at this reprieve was magnified when I learned in January 1981 that I would be assigned to the 320th Bomb Wing, based at Mather Air Force Base, just outside of Sacramento, California – an hour’s drive from Berkeley. Moreover, I would be assigned as the vice wing commander, one step removed from the prize I had long sought. The reporting date was immediate, which brought me back to earth. That meant Dorene would have to stay in Alexandria through the end of the school year while I took up bachelor life at Mather. That unhappy reality was eased by the fact that, if Berkeley passed muster, Brett would be close-by for the duration of my tour.

Brett and I set off in the Camaro in early February, sharing the driving duties and relishing hours of quality time. We made Omaha in three days, where I stopped by SAC Headquarters to pay courtesy calls. I got a lot of advice, none more important than four words from the DCS for Operations: “When in doubt, investigate.” I didn’t immediately grasp the import of his brief homily, but he said the words with such conviction they stuck in my mind. A year later, they would save my career.

From Offutt, we took I-80 through Wyoming, Utah, and California and on to Berkeley. There, we made an uneventful tour of the impressive campus – me in uniform – that convinced us the heathen had gone to ground. This sealed the deal. I put Brett on an airplane home, headed east on I-80 for the short drive to Mather, and resumed my budding love affair with Strategic Air Command. It was going to be a long and crisis-ridden courtship.
My Great-Grandfather Lee Jackson, at the left, baptizing a group of converts, circa 1890. A messianic Church of Christ minister, he preached in several southern states, establishing churches along the way. His genes are resolutely lodged in my DNA; my first calling was to follow in his footsteps.
My Great-Aunt Lillian Johnson, affectionately called “Sister,” who raised my mother and with whom I lived on occasion, on the front lawn of her Oakland, Mississippi, home, with Happy, her constant companion. I adored her, sitting close by for hours as she penned her voluminous correspondence, or read to me from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and *National Geographic*. 
A young lad of the rural South; middle child of three Butler offspring; Army brat; recurring resident of Oakland, Mississippi; carrier of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*; pathetic half-back and pass defender for the “Hornets”; owner of “Old Blue,” a sway-back mare, and a petulant Black Angus calf, name unmentionable.
At the Memphis, TN, airport in 1953, as my father Grady departed for South Korea, with my mother Katherine, older sister Anne, and younger brother Bill. Grady left college during the Depression, joined the Army, received a reserve officer commission in WW II, and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1956.
Coxswain of the Washington-Lee High School senior eight-oared boat, shown here in the flier heralding the forthcoming National Schoolboy Rowing Championships, which we won to cap an undefeated season. Sitting directly to my front in the “stroke” position was Pete “Tommy-gun” Kresky, who would row at any pace to ensure victory.
The Air Force Academy converted me from diver to trampolinist on the gymnastics team. Good thing. In my fourth year, I met Dorene Nunley, a student hostess at a Western American Athletic Union competition held at Los Angeles State College. I was upside down on the trampoline the first instant I saw her, and have been head-over-heels in love ever since.
First Class (senior) cadet and Commander of the 13th Cadet Squadron, named best of the twenty such 100-man units. We were the guests of honor at a banquet hosted by the Air Force Association. Here I greet General Curtis LeMay, flanked by my Air Officer Commanding, Army Major William A. Patch.
My first official photograph as an Air Force commissioned officer and brand-new second lieutenant, proudly wearing the navigator wings I had earned during my four years at the Academy. My first duty station was Williams AFB, AZ, just outside of Phoenix, where I spent 55 weeks earning my pilot wings.
Newlyweds, August 25th, 1962, St. John of God Church, Norwalk, CA, flanked by family and close friends in the wedding party. We spent our honeymoon night at the Ramada Inn, Blythe, CA, en route back to Williams AFB, from whence I had gone AWOL twice a month to court my future bride in Los Angeles.
Our family became complete in Paris, France, where I was completing a Master’s Degree at the Institut d’Études Politiques in 1965-67. Brett was three years old, and Lisa had been born a month earlier at the American Hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine. Five months later, we were in Apple Valley, CA, where I trained in the F-4D at George AFB, en route to South Vietnam.
Receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross medal from General George Brown, for whom I had served as aide-de-camp during the last six months of my year in Vietnam in 1968-69. He played an instrumental role in my career, most importantly by arranging a job interview in 1977 with the Commander of Strategic Air Command.
Attending the Ring Dance of the Class of 1972 at the Air Force Academy where I taught Political Science from 1969 to 1972. These were turbulent years at my alma mater, marked by two honor scandals. I wrote a very critical assessment of the issues I believed to be at the root of the problem and titled it “Operation New Look.” It prompted the Superintendent to change the focus of the mission.
With Dorene’s parents, Veda and J.O., at a Las Vegas dinner show during my 1972-73 assignment at Norton AFB, San Bernardino, CA, just an hour’s drive from their home in Hemet. They took me into their hearts as one of their own and provided a refuge for Dorene and the children during my prolonged absences.
Dorene with Bob Hope following his remarks to the Officers Wives Club of Washington, D.C., for which she served as Program Chairman during my 1974-77 Pentagon tour. She served him a box lunch, inspired by his anecdote that he once threw a box lunch to a shark – who promptly threw it back. As a thank you gift, she later presented him with a bronzed box lunch, complete with a milk carton.
Outside our quarters at Griffiss AFB, Rome, NY, where I was the Deputy Commander for Operations of a B-52 bomber/KC-135 tanker wing. This was challenging duty, the more so due to the Lake Erie snow belt that saw winter accumulations of 175 inches – which Brett and Lisa enjoyed a lot more than I did. I ran five miles a day, no matter the weather, to stay fit for these trying conditions.
One of the dearest men with whom I have been privileged to work. General Lew Allen, a gentle soul with a powerful intellect, was thrust into his role as Chief of Staff in desperate times. Treated badly by lesser men, he never lost his composure or moral footing. Our handshake reflects perfectly his trust in me and my regard for him.
PART TWO:

★★★★★

Executive
Chapter 18

320th Bomb Wing Commander
(1981 – 1983)

As I made the hour’s drive to Mather, I reflected on how much better prepared I was for the operational challenges of the nuclear mission than I had been when I reported to the 416th Bomb Wing at Griffiss AFB two years earlier. I was in excellent physical shape, thanks to a rigorous running and strength-building program. I was also mentally tougher after surviving the grinding weather in upstate New York, a busted ORI, and duty as hired gun to an Air Force Chief of Staff whose flanks needed protecting. I had also made the right move professionally in pressing for a return to the field rather than staying at the side of my high-ranking boss. I wanted to earn my spurs as an operational commander, not a senior staff officer. The personnel gurus agreed; they had me on a path in which I would make or break my fortunes at the heart of the SAC mission.

Mirroring my experience at Griffiss, I was again being given a year to learn the ropes in a supporting role. As the vice wing commander, I could get up to speed without too much exposure to the risks and pressures that come with command. Those fell to my new boss, Colonel Dick Goetze, a 1959 graduate of the Air Force Academy whose career track had been remarkably similar to mine, including an Olmsted scholarship. His had taken him to Argentina, where he met his wife, Vera. He earned a master’s and a doctorate, spent a tour in Vietnam flying AC-47 gunships, returned to the Pentagon in the Air Force Plans Directorate, then went to the field, joining SAC as a major about to make lieutenant colonel. There, he rose from a junior B-52 aircraft commander to squadron commander, no mean feat, and then signed on for air attaché duty back in Argentina. From there, he returned to the Pentagon, made full colonel and was sent to Mather AFB as vice commander of the 320th Bomb Wing. Now he had been elevated to wing commander, a track I hoped to follow. He welcomed me graciously, sketched out my duties, and invited me to
dinner, where I was swept into the vortex of his wife Vera, whose beauty and dramatic persona reminded me of my sister. We all hit it off famously. By evening’s end, I felt comfortable and confident about our relationship, and looked forward to the job at hand.

The 320th Bomb Wing was the largest of several tenant organizations based at Mather AFB, hosted by an Air Training Command wing whose mission was to train navigators in its fleet of T-29 aircraft. That added to my comfort level, as I had earned my navigator wings in that same bird while an Academy cadet and felt very much at home with the training operation. Mather AFB was a compact base, easy to get around, a short drive from Sacramento, and within easy reach of Lake Tahoe, San Francisco, and other attractions. The commander of the training wing was a protégé of General Iosue (the Air Staff head of personnel) who, with wife, presided over Mather AFB as their feudal domain. They were bright, able and insufferably arrogant people, who exuded an elitism I found extremely off-putting.

To their credit, Dick and Vera had developed a good working relationship with this overbearing couple, facilitated by the fact that they lived side-by-side in senior officer quarters nestled in a tract of standard-issue government housing. The training wing vice commander lived next to the Goetzes, and our abode was the fourth and last in line on what was called Commanders Row. I was able to move in immediately, making do with government furniture and dishes until our household goods arrived. I spent the next four months refreshing my two-year-old B-52 and KC-135 piloting skills from 416th Bomb Wing days at Griffiss AFB, learning the wing’s operational mission, and getting to know the wing staff, crew force, maintenance organizations and security police. As a tenant wing, we relied on our host for the usual support services – medical care, the BX and commissary, and recreational outlets: clubs, theater, and so forth. That allowed Dick and me to stay tightly focused on our primary responsibilities: training the crews, maintaining the aircraft, and securing the nuclear weapons charged to our keeping.

The senior staff, which included four colonels besides Dick and me, was a close and congenial group; in fact, a bit too close for my preference. The DCO, revered by the flight crews, was a genial, fatherly type, with deep SAC experience. His assistant was a jovial sort who would soon be promoted to full colonel. The DCM, also a SAC veteran, was master of his domain, and, like his operations counterpart, preferred to run his organization without input from the front office. His assistant was a lovable, scruffy old SAC warrior putting in his time until retirement. I liked and developed cordial relations with all of
them, while keeping in mind that they might well end up working for me a year hence. I wanted their respect but needed to keep friendships within strict limits – no easy task in such a close-knit outfit, but one they understood and respected.

My most urgent attention went to the security police squadron, to which Dick Goetz asked me to pay particular attention. I began by attending every shift change – 10:00 a.m., 6:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. – until I had met and talked to every one of these young men and women and their supervisors. I went to their social functions, kept track of their personal milestones and disciplinary problems, and stayed close to their squadron commander and senior NCO. The commander was competent and personable, a good, knowledgeable troop leader. The NCO was a whiner and a slacker who made a practice of running to the vice commander claiming racial abuse when his poor performance drew a reprimand. After a couple of rounds of listening to his version of events, I documented his history of false allegations, called him to my office, and, with the wing commander’s executive officer sitting in as a witness, read him the riot act. By the time I had finished, both of my guests were in shock. The NCO put in his retirement papers shortly thereafter. The exec later told Dorene that his initial doubts about whether I was tough enough to be a commander dissolved thirty seconds into the most severe ass-chewing he had ever heard – yet I never raised my voice. My rule about conducting one well-deserved public hanging still held; that ended all penny ante complaints.

There are innumerable other tasks that fall to the vice commander, the most important of which is to act as the local Inspector General, that is, to hear complaints that people in the wing chose for one reason or another to register outside the normal chain of command, usually because they didn’t think they would get a fair hearing from their immediate supervisors. Researching these issues took a lot of legwork and paperwork. Serious matters, such as accusations of sexual harassment, required a full-blown investigation. That particular form of misbehavior on the part of subordinates would soon pose one of the most stressful leadership challenges of my career.

The other responsibilities that occupied my time served me well when I was moved up to replace Dick. I sat on ten boards, committees and groups, ran another ten or so programs mandated by SAC Headquarters, managed the wing staff for Dick, ran periodic exercises to prepare the Wing for the endless series of inspections and competitions that constitute the life of an operational unit, and flew frequently to gauge the competence of the crews and the condition of the aircraft.

By the time the school year ended in Alexandria, I was up to speed in my
duties and more than ready for Dorene and the kids to join me at Mather. Brett’s final year of high school had gone very well, while Lisa had continued her sterling performance as she prepared to step up to her freshman year in yet another school system. Dorene reluctantly closed her two thriving businesses, once again supervised a move by herself, planned another cross-country trip, and made the long but happily uneventful trek to northern California. The household goods arrived before the family, allowing me to have the quarters arranged in advance of their arrival. That rather astonished the senior wives, who elevated me to hero status as a model husband. How little they knew.

With our reunion, my morale improved immensely. Dorene was weary from the journey but had no respite. She quickly plunged into the wing’s active social life, finding herself in the unsettling position of being judged by a group of spouses I had already won over. Dorene gracefully tolerated this scrutiny and soon earned their trust. This was no simple transition, moving from an urban Virginia setting and a high-visibility job in the Pentagon to a second-fiddle field assignment in the outskirts of Sacramento, California. The 320th Bomb Wing now had at the helm two fast-mover Academy grads, and their strong, confident wives. My role proved far easier to play than Dorene’s; the cast of characters she had to deal with ranged from the saintly to the apathetic to the mean-spirited.

Thus began in earnest a year-long apprenticeship, serving as a loyal wingman to Dick, preparing for what I assumed would be an eventual move to his job, and enjoying some quality family time. It was as relaxed a time as I could recall since my second year at Craig AFB, after I had joined the academics squadron. Brett moved to the University of California, Berkeley, in the fall, where he was off to a splendid start on every front, from his dormitory mates, to his class schedule, to his Air Force ROTC unit, which had granted him a scholarship. Lisa entered Folsom High School, where her beauty, brains, and charm won ready acceptance and a slew of eager suitors. Come December and the Christmas break, we all flew “space-available” to Honolulu, where we stayed in the military hotel and had a terrific vacation, a first for our family. We spent a glorious week visiting the local beaches and restaurants, rebuilding bonds that had been severely stressed by the intense course of my career reaching back twenty years to a corn field at the end of the runway in Selma, Alabama.

By early spring, the wing had passed all of its obligatory tests, and Dick had done a solid job as wing commander. I had played my role well, staying out of the limelight, cleaning up the messes, and hitting the books to memorize the mountain of rules, regulations and procedures every commander has to
master. The payoff came for both of us in March of 1982, when announcement was made that Dick Goetze was moving back to the Pentagon to be chief of the Strategic Operations Division in the Joint Staff, a stepping stone to brigadier general. I was named to replace him as the 13th commander of the 320th Bomb Wing, my career-long ambition for attaining field command finally realized.

It was an exceedingly happy and gratifying moment, recognition of professional accomplishment and potential that now set my feet firmly on a path toward greater responsibility. There are a relative handful of positions in any military service that are at the heart of its essence; the most coveted entail operational command, whether of soldiers, sailors, airmen or Marines. I had not served in the role of commander since I had headed the 13th Cadet Squadron during my senior year at the Air Force Academy. Twenty-one years later, I was in most respects exactly the same person, but a bit more worldly-wise, tougher mentally and emotionally, and properly skilled in my profession. I felt ready for the test ahead. It was just as well that I was blissfully unaware of how demanding that test would be.

As had become my habit in every new assignment going back to my days as aide-de-camp to General Brown, the day after the announcement, I pulled a steno pad from my desk drawer, labeled the cover, “Col. Lee Butler, 320th Bomb Wing,” and began systematically to construct a home-grown manual on how I would approach my many responsibilities. This was a habit that had earned me the title Chief Ten Lists from my amused children, who, I am sure, often wondered what it took to get on a list that would ensure more of my time and attention. At the end of the day, I had filled some ten pages, beginning with a section entitled Initial Actions, then proceeding through a meticulous rendering of every meeting, program, activity, manual, visit, inspection, competition, ceremony and facility that fell within my purview. That set the stage for the next step, which was to sit down with my secretary-to-be, Lil Schatz. She was a tough, smart lady, who knew the wing and its life like a book. She had shepherded a long list of commanders through their turn in the barrel and served me with wisdom and unwavering loyalty through the many tests to come. We went through a calendar exercise, laying out every known event for the following twelve months, blocking out likely periods for no-notice inspections, preparatory exercises, and training for competitions. We then annotated the recurring visits and meetings I would use to keep my finger on the pulse of the wing; with Dorene, we scheduled social occasions, such as dinners at our quarters, wing-wide get-togethers and community functions. Finally, we created suspense files for reports and correspondence required for higher headquarters, my staff evaluations, and the newspaper deadline for the weekly articles.
I intended to write, and myriad other time-sensitive matters. That done, I turned my attention to the farewell party and change-of-command ceremony that would mark the Goetzes’ departure. These events are the capstone of every commander’s tenure, providing closure to a prized assignment and often to a career as well, for those not selected for promotion or who elect to retire at the pinnacle of their service.

These farewell events went well, beginning with a spouses’ affair for Vera, then a memorable dinner at the officers’ club, and finally the change of command ceremony presided over by the 15th Air Force Commander, a diminutive, ruddy-cheeked Irish three-star named John Murphy, who owned SAC’s string of bases in the western United States. The heart of the ceremony is the passing of the unit colors, topped with battle streamers from the campaigns in which the 320th Bomb Wing, as a bomb group, had seen action going back to World War II. As Dick passed the flag to General Murphy, he spoke the time-honored words, “Sir, I relinquish command,” and then as I received the colors I completed the sequence with a phrase I had long hoped to utter: “Sir, I assume command.”

Following the ceremony, also in keeping with tradition, the Goetzes immediately departed the base, and Dorene and I repaired to the Club for the customary reception honoring the new wing commander and his lady. With Brett and Lisa at our side, underscoring the importance of family, we spent several hours in the receiving line greeting a multitude of dignitaries, the senior staff from the host wing, key members of the local civilian community, including a former 320th commander who lived nearby, and most importantly many of the members of what was now my wing – from the youngest airman to the key colonels who were mine to lead. That group was missing a member: my new vice commander had been named but was still a week away from coming on board. I did not know him, but he had sterling credentials: a 1963 graduate from the Air Force Academy, three times promoted early, solid SAC experience and clearly a “comer” being placed in the line of succession. His career and mine were about to be joined in a drama that very nearly led to mutual disaster. But before that crisis unfolded, the powers that be had another little surprise for me: the annual no-notice Operational Readiness Inspection. The fact that I was without a vice commander did not figure in the calculations of the SAC Inspector General and his team of inspectors. It was a baptism of fire.

I was granted a week of settling in before the unexpected ORI shoe dropped, giving me just enough time to move my office across the reception area to the wing commander’s office, for Dorene and me to move our worldly possessions two houses down the street – at ATC’s insistence – to the
commander’s quarters, and to get a start on my “initial actions” list. The most important of these comprised a series of a dozen meetings that began with my secretary Lil, then the exec, Major Dave Overcast; my senior enlisted advisor, Chief Master Sergeant Dick Wright; and the wing staff. Next came the colonels, squadron commanders and first sergeants, the “top three” enlisted ranks, the operations and maintenance staffs, and the aircrew force, to whom I made a subtle but telling point, as I had done at Griffiss, by wearing my navigator rather than pilot wings during my first visit as commander to the alert facility. Finally, I brought the entire wing together in the base theater for my first Commander’s Call, filling the room time and again until I had seen every person in my organization face-to-face. By Friday, I felt comfortable that the unit was now mine, facilitated by the fact that I had spent the past year preparing for it. I was a known quantity, people were comfortable with me, and given the wing’s record of success, there was no need for dramatic changes. That sense of comfort, and the authority I had earned, paid dividends on the first day of my second week in office. Shortly after the 8:00 morning staff meeting, I received a call from the command post, the nerve-center of wing activity and my most direct link to my chain of command, informing me that the SAC Inspector General and his team of one hundred minions were five minutes from landing. The ORI was upon us, weeks before what we had surmised as the most likely period of vulnerability. It was do-or-die time before I had completed a single practice exercise as commander.

For the next five days, I slept in my office, relying on Dorene to bring me a fresh uniform every day and food whenever I could manage time to eat. For the first four days the command post was my principal domain, where my top supervisors and I convened as a battle staff. Our role was to conduct the precise and unforgiving race against the clock that would prepare our seventeen bomber and seventeen tanker aircraft, and associated crews, to simulate execution of their wartime mission. While I was no stranger to this exercise, this was my first time at the helm and I had no escape from the unrelenting pressure. From the moment the execution message came over the phone from SAC Headquarters, until the last plane was declared combat-ready twenty-four hours later, I tracked a mountain of details – the movement of dozens of nuclear weapons, the loading of tens of thousands of gallons of jet fuel, and the programming of the weapons release codes into the bombing computers – every critical-path item that dictated success or failure in what is known as the aircraft generation phase.

Once the inspectors had made their meticulous examination of every plane and checked each crew member for possession of the required equipment, we
began the nerve-wracking wait for the message that would trigger the launch of the armada poised on the parking ramp, sending thirty-four mammoth aircraft lumbering down the runway at nine-second intervals, clawing their way into the air and climbing majestically into a setting sun en route to the simulated wartime target area. This was the deadliest ballet ever orchestrated, a dress rehearsal for Armageddon. Although by now I had been witness to a simulated full Emergency War Order launch a half-dozen times, I still marveled at the sight, huge machines of war propelled by hundreds of engines straining at full throttle, bound in a ritual that left no margin for failure.

I monitored the launch from my wing commander’s vehicle, with the Inspector General riding shotgun. Across the runway, on a gently sloping hill, Dorene had gathered hundreds of onlookers to cheer the troops. There were wives and children, members of the wing not engaged in this phase of the inspection, and other base personnel who wanted to drink in the sights and sounds of the spectacle. We all heaved a collective sigh of relief when the last aircraft lifted from the pavement and tucked away its wheels. At that point, there was nothing to do but wait for the results, another nine hours of fingernail-chewing tension until the electronic scores from the bombing runs were compiled and transmitted to the command post. By then, most of the crews would have returned, each met planeside by the tanker or bomb squadron commander, the DCO, and myself. Although not a perfect predictor, the strongly positive reports of the radar navigators, together with the tanker reports of one hundred percent success during the air refueling portion of the flight, led us to believe that we were safely through this critical aspect of our test. The actual scores confirmed that optimism, and the ominous foreboding that had been embedded in my psyche by the Griffiss disaster in 1978 suddenly lifted. While there were yet many opportunities for screw-ups, none entailed the automatic failure of a busted flight phase.

In fact, the rest of the visit went well, including the critical Nuclear Surety Inspection that examined the nuclear stockpile, weapons handling, security procedures, and documentation. According to tradition, the ORI outbrief was held in the base theater with a broad cross-section of the wing in attendance. We received an overall “Excellent” rating, one below the top score of “Outstanding,” but I was more than happy to take that rating to the bank. A number of follow-up items would have to be corrected to avoid a dreaded “repeat deficiency” on the next ORI go-round, a task that I would leave to my vice commander who had arrived the day before the conclusion of the inspection.

The new Vice gave every appearance of being as good as his press clippings promised. He was about my size, smart, in great physical shape and
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eager to get in harness. Like me a year earlier, he had left his family back in Virginia to finish the school year, so he took up light housekeeping in the BOQ awaiting their arrival. After a week of watching him in action, I was sure we would make a great team, taking the 320th Bomb Wing to an even higher level of performance. And then came the phone call.

I was sitting at my desk when Lil poked her head into the office to tell me that the vice commander of the host Air Training Command wing was on the line. Although we had met, we had rarely talked, so I was curious about what he had to say. When he said he was calling in his IG capacity, my alarm bells immediately started ringing. He got right to the point. The wife of a master sergeant in my outfit had just paid him a visit to lodge a complaint that she had been sexually harassed by none other than my brand-new vice commander. The alleged incident had occurred the night before in the parking lot of the officers’ club. The story was that during her shift as a cocktail waitress, she and the vice commander had struck up a conversation that carried over until closing time. He offered to walk her to her car, she accepted, and on arrival he made advances which she spurned. When she reached home, she and her husband discussed the encounter and agreed that she should seek redress through official channels.

I was shocked by this turn of events, so much so that I took leave of my good sense, embarking on a series of errors in judgment that led me to the brink of disaster. My first error was to call the vice commander into my office and confront him with the allegation, which he immediately and emotionally denied. My second error was to believe him. My third error was to call in the husband of the woman in question and, with my vice commander sitting in on the conversation, ask for his version of events. Obviously ill at ease, he simply and quietly requested that he be reassigned from the wing. At that point I finally realized that I was way out in front of my headlights on this problem. I asked the Vice to leave the room, then requested the sergeant’s permission to call on his wife and ask to speak with her privately. This was also way outside the bounds of legal propriety, but at this juncture I wanted desperately to get some sense of the truth before deciding how to unwind my folly. Fortunately, she did agree to talk. I went to her base quarters, hoping to put her at ease, and listened intently to her story. Everything about it rang true, as did her demeanor and evident good character. As I drove back to the office, the words of a veteran SAC general I had visited at Offutt AFB during my drive to Mather AFB a year earlier came crashing home: “When in doubt, investigate.”

I picked up the phone and called my air division commander, Brigadier General Jesse Hocker, briefly described the situation, and requested an
investigating officer from his headquarters. A seasoned colonel arrived the next day and spent the better part of a week digging out the facts, a task greatly facilitated by the testimony of an eyewitness who corroborated the events in the parking lot as related to me by my NCO’s wife. On receiving his report, I relieved the vice commander from his duties. There followed an extremely awkward two-week period during which the matter worked its way up the chain of command. The Vice was removed from his position and reassigned to an obscure job in a neighboring air division, his career in ruins. He escaped being brought up on charges as he should have been. Nonetheless, a form of justice had been rendered, I had recouped my reputation with my NCO corps, and I was much the wiser for the experience, although emotionally spent. Of course, I was once again without a vice commander, tied to the base because I could not be more than a few minutes distant from my command post with a series of competitions and inspections on tap. Things were not destined to improve; indeed, they were about to get very much worse. This would be the year from Hell.

After the Vice finally departed, Dorene and I could refocus our energies on strengthening relationships within the wing. Dorene led off by staging another of her Follies productions, a multi-act show that fostered camaraderie among the wives and allowed a handful of the men to ham it up as well. The orchestration and rehearsals stretched over several weeks, leading to three full-house performances over a Friday and a Saturday night. I took my usual lead in one of the numbers, the ladies lineup from “Big Spender.” (In the previous show, I had headed up a song-and-dance sketch based on Shirley Temple and “The Good Ship Lollipop,” the circular sweet taped neatly to the antenna of my mobile phone.)

The transition to the wing commander’s role got more challenging when I was issued a whole new complement of colonels, who proved to be a mixed bag. The incoming DCM, Ed Lay, was a prize, a solid and capable professional, and a team player. His wife, Martha, was equally a jewel, sweet and unassuming and a willing volunteer. The new DCO was cut from different cloth. He was a good officer, loyal and hardworking but difficult to connect with on a personal level, a bit withdrawn and prone to hunkering down in his office. His wife seemed to mask a heavy heart behind an endearing cheeriness. The DCO’s assistant was a newly promoted colonel, with an edge that two years later, despite my cautioning him, cost him dearly in a face-off with a four-star, which he was bound to lose.

The most crucial of the new arrivals, however, was that of my next vice commander, George Golding, and his wife, Carol Jean. With a trip to
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SAC Headquarters for a Commanders Conference looming, I gave George a crash course on the unit’s EWO mission, which, as an old SAC hand, he readily absorbed, then put him in the capable hands of the staff, and left feeling comfortable. I liked George from the get-go. He was older by far than his ill-fated predecessor, pleasant, with a ready smile and contagious laugh, and he slipped into harness like a patient plow horse. My initial, favorable impression only deepened after my return from the SAC Headquarters. George had already won acceptance from peers and subordinates alike, had assimilated his vice commander duties while holding down the fort for me, and was showing strong promise as a successor down the road.

Just as George and I put the finishing touches on a twelve-month game plan, my leaders threw another monkey wrench into the works. At Beale AFB, a sprawling facility in the northern reaches of California and home to the fleet of priceless SR-71 supersonic reconnaissance aircraft, major damage had been suffered by one of these Mach-3 marvels when it had been dropped on its belly in a hangar during a routine maintenance procedure. As was usual in these circumstances, an accident board had been convened, and George had been designated as its president. I was about to lose my right-hand man for the next three months.

The only upside of this calamity was that, having been the vice commander for a year, I knew I could handle both sets of duties with stepped-up assistance from the stronger lieutenant colonels on my staff. Otherwise, it was a sentence to relentlessly long days and nights, tethered to the base and my command post. That also meant no flying, as I could not be absent from my post for the extended periods required by the typical tanker and bomber training missions. All I could do was grind it out, pushing my jogging program to thirty miles a week to stay in top physical shape. The long, hot San Joaquin Valley summer came and went, and we did passably well on our various tests. Finally, by the end of September, I had George back. He had done a superb job piecing together the root causes of the Beale accident and specifying corrective action. He had briefed his conclusions up the long chain of command from air division to numbered air force to SAC Headquarters and its Commander-in-Chief, General Bennie Davis. This was arduous and delicate business, with careers on the line and some likelihood of action under the military justice system, which could bring severe penalties.

I got exactly one month of relief following George’s return to Mather, and then George was gone again. A B-52 based at Castle AFB returning from a training mission had crashed on landing, doing major damage to the runway, shutting down all flying operations at the base, and thereby stranding at other
bases a fleet of aircraft which had been flying training missions at the time. Astonishingly, SAC Safety tapped George to chair the accident board even though he was still catching his breath from the task just completed. Accident boards are usually headed up by wing vice commanders, but given the number of wings and the relative rarity of mishaps, this back-to-back tasking was unprecedented and, in my view, unnecessary. I felt sorry for George and worse for me and Dorene, as I was once more restricted to the base. Not flying was my greater concern, both for my own proficiency and for my bond with the crew force. My duties became even heavier when a handful of the homeless Castle B-52 and KC-135 tanker aircraft were temporarily assigned to Mather, where they would be flown by Castle students and instructors who were shuttling back and forth between the two bases by road. Although Castle supervisors remained responsible for these flights, we still had to integrate them into our flying schedule, and our runway monitors had to oversee their launches. This highly unusual arrangement was fraught with risks of miscommunication or worse, and worse it was to be.

The morning of 15th of December, 1982, found me in the windowless briefing room located alongside my headquarters building, and facing the runway. I was making one of my monthly newcomers’ presentations, welcoming recent arrivals and making sure they heard directly from me how I saw the mission and my expectations of them. The hour was early, just after 8:00, and I was no more than five minutes into my talk when the exterior door to my right abruptly opened, flooding the room with the glare of bright sunlight. Though a bit blinded, I could make out the ashen face of my DCO. He didn’t have to say a word; I could see the towering pillar of boiling black smoke in the distance. One of the transient B-52 aircraft from Castle operating out of Mather had just crashed on takeoff, killing all ten souls on board.

I dismissed the newcomers’ orientation audience and headed toward the command post, gathering myself for what would lie beyond its door. For the next several hours, my actions would be directed by checklists designed to ensure that the multiple interests, risks, and fears invoked by an aircraft accident were addressed in the appropriate order and with proper consideration. At this point, I had no idea of how widespread the destruction might be. While the land immediately off the end of the runway had been kept clear of development, I feared that the nearest cluster of homes along its extended centerline might be in jeopardy. This initial concern was relieved by news that the plane had gone down in the open field just beyond the base boundary, minimizing collateral damage and helping to contain the burning jet fuel. Rapid reaction teams from my outfit, the host wing, and the local community were at
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the scene within minutes. Their frequent joint disaster response exercises paid off as they secured the crash site against the flood of onlookers racing to the area, a horde of news helicopters already overhead. The guarded perimeter held those on the ground at bay while mortuary and explosives specialists set about their grim and risky work.

After the initial round of notifications to higher headquarters, my next concern was to get a statement to the media to quell rumors and reduce public anxiety, the central point of which was to assure the world that nuclear weapons were not involved. Hard on the heels of that release, came the sensitive task of positively identifying the souls on board and getting the names to the 93d Bomb Wing Commander at Castle AFB, so he could orchestrate the dolorous process of notifying next-of-kin. Six of the dead were students, the other four instructors – one for each of the specialties being taught to B-52 crews: piloting, navigation, electronic warfare and gunnery. Finally, after getting the facts straight, I held a press conference to get them out in plain view, praise the work of the civilian firefighters and police, and briefly explain how the accident investigation would proceed. That session tamped down the media fires and let me turn my attention to repairing the morale of my troops, who felt the emotional impact of the crash no less than their counterparts at Castle.

I waited until the next day to walk the blackened crash site, picturing the stricken plane losing its battle for speed and altitude, staggering into a full stall and plummeting, immense and helpless, into the waiting earth, where it disappeared in a massive conflagration. I knew that for at least a few seconds, everyone on board was seized with the horrific understanding that there would be no recovery, that they were staring death in the face, condemned by some failure of man or machine. My thoughts returned to the field in Alabama and the roiling waters of the South China Sea, knowing that on either of those occasions the outcome for me could have mirrored the present tragedy, the chaplain at Dorene’s door with news that for centuries has brought wives and mothers to their knees. With pictures of the desolate crash site, the twisted remains of the B-52 starkly visible, commanding every front page and TV news broadcast in the area, I knew I had to talk to the families of my troops, and quickly. I wanted to initiate closure on this disaster before the Christmas holidays so that they could find some comfort in the season’s familiar rituals.

Dorene accompanied me on visits, first to the crash site, to thank the cops, to selected families, and to a series of talks in the base theater designed to gauge the emotional impact, especially among spouses and children. I sensed my wing at Mather was on the road to recovery, but when Dorene and I arrived for the memorial service in Castle’s chapel, the air was still heavy with
mourning. We held hands tightly as we whispered words of sympathy to the widows, children, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers of the victims. As we made the drive back to Mather, my thoughts began to turn to the next phase in the process: dealing with the accident board, its report, and the march up the chain of command, leading ultimately to the conference room of the CINCSAC, as tough and unforgiving a man as had ever occupied his position.

The Accident Board had little problem determining the chain of events leading up to the accident. The causal factor was a shocking breakdown in professional discipline, one I would never have expected from Castle AFB instructor pilots. It far exceeded the lapse of my instructor pilot at Castle AFB years earlier when he had miscalculated our go-no-go speed during preparations for take-off on a day when it was critical to a safe departure. The lapse in this case began during the planning of a minimum-interval takeoff (MITO), the close interval launch of multiple bomber and tanker aircraft essential to ensure their survival in the face of an incoming nuclear-armed ballistic missile attack. While there were only two B-52s in this practice launch, the attention required at every phase, from planning to execution, was no less than if dozens of planes had been involved. The stage was set by the fact that, following the MITO, the two planes were scheduled to proceed on separate training missions of differing durations, so that they were to take off with significantly different fuel loads. Therefore, it was imperative that the lighter bomber, which would accelerate faster than the more heavily-loaded one, be in the lead position. With only nine-second spacing at the runway threshold, that interval could easily be lost during or shortly after lift-off, if the heavier bomber were at the front.

Incredibly, that is precisely what occurred. The two IPs got the takeoff order wrong, the second, lighter aircraft began to rapidly overtake the first bomber just after getting airborne, and the panicked student pilot yanked back the throttles to slow the closure rate on the aircraft in front of him. His instructor, trying to preclude a fatal loss of airspeed, jammed the throttles full forward again. In so doing, he sent himself and nine mates to their doom. In the B-52G, water augmentation was used to boost thrust during take-off, with the flow delayed until a smooth advance of the throttles brings the engines to full power. When the student had reduced power, the flow of water into the combustion chambers had been automatically interrupted. By snapping the throttles full-forward a second later, the IP had re-initiated the flow of water into the engines. The surge of water had flooded the combustion chambers of all eight engines and, with the bomber only a few hundred feet above the ground, had caused a fatal loss of thrust. A review of the fuel logs and expert eyewitness accounts of the bomber’s path made for easy reconstruction of
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these events. On reading the report, I was, by turn, professionally appalled and personally relieved. The pilot’s error was dismaying, but given the autonomous nature of the operations of the Castle-assigned bombers from my runway, I had not been in a position to prevent the accident. Accountability for the actions of the IPs seemed to lie squarely on the shoulders of the Castle Wing Commander.

He, however, begged to disagree and tried to deflect responsibility during the accident board’s briefing to Lieutenant General Murphy at his 15th Air Force Headquarters at March AFB near Riverside, California. One of the contributing causes identified was supervisor error, which my fellow wing commander tried to pin on me and the 320th Bomb Wing. However, he failed in his reasoning to acknowledge the detailed written contract that had been worked out between our two organizations and approved by 15th Air Force. It spelled out precisely who was responsible for what in Castle’s transient flight operations at Mather. That contract clearly stated that the 93rd Bomb Wing was charged with overseeing its flying activity at Mather, and with good reason – we were not familiar with the voluminous rules governing student training. The president of the Accident Board made that point clear immediately, and General Murphy, in turn, made clear his displeasure at my counterpart’s cheap shot.

Not surprisingly, my counterpart was more circumspect during the presentation to the CINCSAC, General Bennie Davis, whom I did not know well, but I was confident that he knew me and was aware of the trust General Brown had reposed in me. I had met him only briefly when he had paid a brief visit to Mather AFB while Dick Goetze was still the wing commander. General Davis’ mood at the accident brief was glum and combative. He had, of course, already been through the accident report and had made up his mind about who was responsible for the breakdown in discipline and supervision. After the session, he took the Castle AFB wing commander back to his office for a private discussion while I waited my turn outside his door. When the door opened and the Castle commander departed, he spoke not a word to me; he looked like a man who had just been, in no uncertain terms, implicated in the death of ten SAC crew members. I had no idea what to expect, but was relieved to be courteously, even warmly, greeted by General Davis. He asked for my personal take on the accident, and I told him I had been through the circumstances in my mind a hundred times, trying to pinpoint where I might have missed an opportunity to intervene and forestall disaster. I did look at the daily flight schedule for the Castle aircraft operating out of Mather, and I could have seen the fuel-load configurations of the two planes involved in the accident during the
afternoon before the fatal mission. However, I was more interested in ensuring that we had resolved any potential timing conflicts between our two flying schedules than in looking at the details of weight and balance for the individual bombers and tankers. Those were items typically left to the two intermediate levels of oversight that screen every mission before it is approved by the wing commander. Nonetheless, the fact that the data had been in front of my eyes, however briefly, and that I had missed their implications would always haunt me, and I told General Davis that. He seemed to appreciate my candor and sent me on my way, a sadder, wiser commander. Alas, it was not the last time I would be in his office following an accident brief. The gods that punish breakdowns in discipline were not done, this time with my own organization.

The aftermath of the accident had occupied most of January, 1983, but once it was off the table, things improved dramatically. George Golding completed his report and the obligatory briefings, doing another superlative job all the way up the line, and reported back for duty. That gave me a needed break, which I used to get back into the air with the flight crews. My proficiency returned quickly, so I elected to command one of my own B-52s in “Busy Razorback,” a 15th Air Force-wide bombing and navigation competition. Each wing was encouraged to enter one crew made up of rated staff people, so I picked my best at each position and flew one training mission before the main competitive event. The chemistry was superb, and we nailed the competition, finishing first among the several staff crews and damn near beating all of the line crews as well. That was a morale booster, particularly after being earthbound for so many months. The crews also showed their mettle during the annual no-notice visit by the SAC Combat Evaluation Group, or CEVG, the same crowd that had descended on Castle AFB during my supposedly final training sortie, destroyed my IP and nearly took my career with his. In an odd coincidence, the team leader for this visit was none other than “Captain America,” the whimsical name I had given the young blond, white-scarfed pilot who had failed me on my check ride during the CEVG visit at Castle several years earlier. Now a major, he handled our re-introduction with equal aplomb, and fortunately this time things turned out much more favorably. We passed the evaluation with only one or two hiccups and he and his teammates were on their way.

Family life was relatively uneventful, with Brett and Lisa happy in their school life. Berkeley was a perfect fit for Brett in every aspect, especially his Air Force ROTC unit, where he was showing strong leadership potential. He and his roommates were fast becoming close friends. Academically, he was well on his way to earning entry into the highly competitive business major. Lisa
was equally a star at Folsom High, where she morphed from an East Coast to a West Coast girl, was a hit with her classmates, and seemed to mature overnight. We gave her a lot of slack, figuring her values were sufficiently strong to sort out what was or was not in her best interest. She made cheerleader, earned all “As,” and acquired a boyfriend, Jeff, a Greek god, who worshipped the ground she walked on. Dorene continued to keep the spouses focused and occupied but was injured in the line of duty when she fell while jogging and did a number on her ankle and her face. Her call to my office on the red phone — “I really need you NOW” — left no doubt that this was a serious mishap, and I was dismayed when I arrived at the quarters to find her trembling in pain. She was on crutches for six weeks, but, as usual, never complained.

By now, spring had arrived and I was about to pass my first anniversary as wing commander. We had successfully navigated a full cycle of exercises, competitions and inspections, and I had dealt with those challenges without the help of a vice commander. Now, as I took stock of my unit going into year two, with my vice commander back, I was looking forward to a less-onerous pace. Having spent the preponderance of my time with the crew dogs, I began the second with a series of visits to my maintenance organizations. The litmus test for aircraft maintenance is getting planes in the air; the highly orchestrated activities required to do so to come together on the flight line, or parking ramp as it also known, a massive field of concrete that is home to the bomber and tanker fleets, grouped separately but in close proximity.

A bright spring morning found me headed to the flight line to observe preparations for the day’s launch before going to visit with the large organizational maintenance squadron, or OMS. I had just driven onto the ramp when I heard what sounded like a crack of lightning. I wheeled around and was greeted with a bone-chilling spectacle. The left wing of one of my B-52 bombers had cracked nearly in two and was dangling from the plane, attached only by a shred of aluminum skin. Worse, since it was being fueled at the time, thousands of gallons of JP-4 jet fuel stored in the wing were pouring out onto the concrete ramp, a river of potential destruction that, if ignited, could destroy everything and kill everyone on the flight line. Cosmic Red Alert. My command, our tanker and bomber aircraft, our people, and our very lives were at grave risk. No place to run, no place to hide. Taking charge was easy — with an incipient catastrophe of this magnitude, if my operation was fated to go up in a ball of fire, I was better off in it.

The men and women on the ramp responded magnificently. I had little to do but watch as they first cleared all motor vehicles from the immediate area, thereby eliminating catalytic converters and other hot spots as potential
sources of ignition for the spreading lake of JP-4 jet fuel. The large mobile generator used to power the fueling operation was quickly shut down, and then a heroic young maintenance troop went up into the cockpit and turned off the aircraft battery power, risking his life as the switch movement could have ignited the fumes filling the cramped area. All in all, it was a superlative performance in the face of mortal danger by dozens of people, most of them barely out of their teens. Their actions mitigated the greatest dangers, allowing time for the fuel vapor cloud to dissipate. I got on my mobile phone and called General Murphy at 15th Air Force to make sure he heard the news first directly from me and to assure him things were under control.

Once again the painfully familiar process began. Records were impounded, another Accident Board was convened, interviews were conducted, and the chain of events was determined. The causal factor was readily found, lurking in an inexcusable maintenance malpractice that dated back many years, one that had ignored a purposeful procedural change instituted to prevent the occurrence of just this type of accident. The heart of the problem was in the field maintenance squadron, or FMS, where heavy repair work is done on major mechanical parts and systems. The repair at issue was a leak in the left wing fuel tank, an awkward area in which to work. Years ago, the procedure for testing the integrity of a repaired fuel tank had been to temporarily plug the hole that allows air to vent from the tank as it is being fueled, then introduce pressurized air into the sealed, empty tank while checking for leaks. However, a young technician had once forgotten to remove the plug from the pressure-relief vent hole after such a leak check, and as the plane was subsequently refueled, the air trapped in the tank had no place to go. Pressure increased to an intolerable level, finally rupturing the tank, completely destroying the aircraft wing.

So, SAC Headquarters changed the procedure. Rather than block the vent, even temporarily, the new procedure was to find and fix suspected leaks by filling the tank with water. It was a more time-consuming but far safer approach. But, unbelievably, the senior NCO in the 320th BMW FMS responsible for the fuel-tank repair section had decided his folks would do it the old way, HQ SAC be damned. He had taught the steps involved to successive generations of young airmen, but without a written checklist – whose existence would have alerted supervisors or inspectors to the illegal and potentially disastrous operation. All that was required to reenact the original accident was a bit of distraction at the critical moment when the plug had to be removed from the vent hole. That distraction was years in coming, but arrived with a vengeance. An urgent call from an aircraft being prepped for take-off required the senior NCO
to leave his shop and deal with the emergency. The unsupervised young team he left behind buttoned up the wing tank of the B-52 they had just repaired, forgetting to remove the fateful plug. The aircraft was towed to the flight line the next morning, the fuel truck arrived and the countdown to disaster moved to its inexorable conclusion.

Back up the chain of command I went, 15th Air Force and then SAC Headquarters. General Davis was not thrilled to see me again under these circumstances, but had evidently already concluded that no wing commander could reasonably have known about the malpractice and, thus, I could not have forestalled the outcome. Court-martial charges were brought against the culpable NCO, the aircraft was repaired, albeit at great expense, and that was the end of it. A few weeks later, General Murphy called to tell me I was being reassigned as commander of the 96th Bomb Wing at Dyess AFB, located just outside of Abilene, Texas. This was a large B-52H wing on a base that also played host to a Military Airlift Command C-130 transport outfit. It was a major operation, home to some 6,000 people, with a full complement of support services. More important, the 96th BMW had just been identified as the first SAC outfit scheduled to receive the brand-new B-1 bomber, the program that General Allen wanted reinstated and was in fact resurrected by President Reagan shortly after assuming office.

Dyess would have to be transformed, physically and operationally, with hundreds of millions of dollars in construction money already approved and a two-year deadline to get the facilities ready. What General Murphy didn’t tell me was how poorly prepared the folks at Dyess were to undertake that effort.

I got a clue about what lay ahead at the SAC Commander’s Conference that took place shortly after the announcement of my impending move. Dorene and I were seated at General Davis’ table during the opening banquet, a surprise to us and to our more senior counterparts. The reason was privately revealed to us by Dorene Sherman, the long-time chief of SAC Protocol, a sweet and intensely caring soul, who had served as command hostess for and had become a confidante of a long line of CINCSACs. It seemed General Davis had come to enjoy Dorene’s company in the course of the previous conference and, taking note, the protocol staff once again seated her at his elbow. As the evening wore on, he commanded the orchestra to play “Faded Love,” during which he and Dorene sang a passable duet. As the night drew to a close, General Davis leaned over and whispered in her ear, “When you and Lee get to Dyess, I expect you to fix it with those ladies down there.” He could have equally said to me, “I expect you to fix it with the men,” but for the moment we were left to puzzle over what exactly it was she was expected to fix at Dyess AFB.
On return to Mather, we set about preparing for the move and dealing with our devastated daughter, who hated leaving Folsom High School. No sooner had we got our possessions on the truck and moved to the temporary living quarters for a few days prior to departure, than I got one more ugly surprise. As I was cleaning out my office, the command post called with the astounding news that the SAC IG and his team were five minutes from landing. I looked at the phone in disbelief. In my waning moments as wing commander, I would have to manage yet another ORI.

Although mentally unprepared for this SAC Headquarters gambit, I knew the drill by heart and had confidence in our unit. They performed like seasoned pros, we earned high marks, and ushered the IG and his team out the door ten days later. Folks were in high spirits for the farewell party two nights later, dubbed ‘A Knight to Remember’ and hosted by the irrepressible Tim Titus, my tanker squadron commander, who would serve us again in the years to come. Dorene and I were brought into the main ballroom, crowned and robed in purple, and seated on two thrones built by the security police. The officers’ club had been transformed into a medieval castle, and dinner was served to an audience seated at long tables arrayed on both sides of the room. It was a spectacular setting and a magical evening. Tim was at his best, the gifts we received were clever and meaningful, and we felt loved and appreciated. This was a memorable end to what had proved to be the most challenging year of my professional life. As I looked out into the assemblage, where seated front and center were the lights of our lives, Brett and Lisa, I reveled in the moment, savoring the blessings and the burdens of leadership, and the good fortune to be given an opportunity to command an even bigger operation.

In later years, I came fully to appreciate the careful process that put me first at Mather AFB as the vice commander, moved me up to wing commander after a year, weighed my performance and acknowledged my potential. This was a system with no guarantees and innumerable risks. It rewarded success and punished failure. Its tests and trials approached those of combat, which it was designed to do as closely as possible. With the help of a terrific team of officers, NCOs, and airmen, along with their spouses, I had survived the risks, had grown in experience and knowledge of the trials and rich rewards of command, and had been judged by the SAC and Air Force senior leadership as worthy of stepping up to the larger role of host wing commander. Although the coming assignment would bring responsibilities for which I had no experience, I had paid close attention to my contemporaries at Mather AFB and how they dealt with their challenges. The ATC wing commander was a very mixed bag, on the one hand smart and effective in making planes fly on time;
but on the other, as I noted, arrogant and abusive to his people. These latter traits did him in. He had been on the fast track to becoming a general officer, but his hubris finally got the best of him. He made an egregious misjudgment involving misuse of one of his wing’s T-29 aircraft. That greatly offended the folks whom he had charged with carrying out this highly improper task. One whistleblower later, his career was toast. His long-time mentor, General Iosue, canned him personally.

Conversely, the lessons I learned from his senior colonels, who ran the base support functions, were all positive. Dorene and I grew close to several of them and their spouses, especially our neighbors, Colonel Goebel James, and his wife, Betty. We developed a special kinship with the resident Catholic priest, Father Bill Denninger. He exuded an aura of spirituality, kindness and empathy that drew us to him from our very first meeting. In the face of successive crises, we came to rely on him for spiritual and emotional support. Like Lil Schatz, my tanker squadron commander, Tim Titus, and third exec, Bob Smith, he became part of our inner circle, someone on whom we could rely under any circumstance.

We would desperately miss this measure of loyalty and competence in the months to come. The skill and discipline that, with two terrible exceptions, we witnessed at Mather and that had led to high marks in a host of performance measures would be sorely missing among the populace of Dyess. Time would be short, and we would have to inspire and lead them on the fly, instilling pride and building teamwork in organizations that had lost their sense of purpose and common endeavor. Worse, the two largest units on Dyess were engaged in open warfare. I relished the challenge but knew that it would be a severe leadership test for Dorene. She would enter the highly charged atmosphere awaiting us without any formal authority but with an even tougher role in salving the wounded feelings of senior wives in both organizations. As always, however, her innate empathy would make her role a whole lot more palatable to these ladies than the bitter medicine I was about to prescribe to the uniformed members of the 96th Bomb Wing.
Chapter 19

96th Bomb Wing Commander

I had never set foot on Dyess, host to the 96th Bomb Wing. The closest I had been to Abilene was while once transiting Texas on near-by Interstate 20, which skirts the city to the north, passing through the likes of Tye, Impact and Elmdale. Dorene, however, knew the area well, having shuffled from town to town in West Texas as J.O. followed the region’s oil fortunes. And, for her, Abilene had an upside: a passel of nearby uncles, aunts and cousins, including her beloved Aunt Pat and Uncle Morris Nunley in Lubbock. Otherwise, we had guarded expectations about the local town folk and the base, especially in light of General Davis’ whispered admonition to “fix it with the ladies,” and General Murphy’s guidance to “get the place ready for the B-1.”

Hoping to get some insight into what needed fixing, we arrived quietly in Abilene a day before the change of command ceremony to make an anonymous tour of the city and its base. That proved highly instructive. Notwithstanding the assertion of its namesake song, Abilene was not by any stretch “the prettiest town I’ve ever seen.” It was on the wrong side of an oil boom and bust, going from euphoric prospects of oil at $50 a barrel (this was 31 years ago!) to seeing the bottom drop out of the market. The town was clean enough, but down on its luck, suffering from declining revenues. The downtown area was in worse shape than the rest of Abilene, victimized by rapid suburban expansion to accommodate a population that had reached an even hundred thousand – ten thousand of whom were students at three religiously affiliated universities. Despite the town’s hard times, however, we could see evidence of a revitalization program that had promise of restoring the city center’s former luster.

That initiative was typical of the foresight and energy of the local business and political leaders. The base was itself a product of a concerted campaign in the early 50s to persuade General Curtis LeMay that Abilene was a prime
location for one of the many SAC bases springing up across the country. Having been home to Tye Army Air Field during World War II – renamed Abilene Army Air Field after the war, just prior to its closure – the city understood well the economic benefits of a large military installation in its midst. Civic leaders purchased and donated five thousand acres to the Department of Defense to seal the deal, and the base opened its gates in April of 1956, at a cost of over $32 million, with a complement of new B-47s at the heart of its strategic mission. In December of that year, it was renamed for Lieutenant Colonel William Edwin Dyess, a deceased local veteran and decorated Army Air Corps aviator who had fought valiantly in the Philippine theater, then survived the Bataan death march and a brutal POW camp. After the war, he had transitioned to the newly independent United States Air Force and later died a hero’s death by staying with his stricken aircraft over a populated area, steering it into the ground in a vacant field.

The base grew and prospered over the years. The wood-frame buildings from the war years gave way to substantial structures built with Cherokee brick, its distinctive reddish-black hue giving the base a unique appearance. Support from the city fathers became legendary, underwritten by the venerable W. P. Wright, Sr., and Oliver Howard, who had ramrodded the effort to get the base built. In testimony to their clout, my first official welcome to my new command had come not from my Air Force seniors but from Fred Lee Hughes, the chairman of the local Military Affairs Committee. The minute he learned of my appointment in a courtesy call from General Davis, he picked up the phone and called me. Fred Lee was the longtime owner of a family Buick dealership; he and his wife Wanda personified the gracious hospitality the town had showered on the base and its residents for nearly three decades.

And so, at first blush Dyess seemed pretty well squared away, thanks to the brick facilities and equally solid support of the city leaders. The drive from the main gate to the central housing area, the BX, commissary and other support activities was lined with nicely restored military aircraft, and the roads seemed in good repair. However, a walk through the BX brought a whole different perspective. The interior was in poor shape, with chipped floors and peeling paint, a condition that proved common throughout all the adjoining buildings. What really got my attention, however, was the men’s restroom where I found racial epithets scrawled on the walls, a chilling sight that mirrored what Dorene had just reported from visiting the women’s restroom. With my commander’s senses now fully alerted, I scanned the base and its people more closely, and more disturbing data mounted. Salutes were not being properly exchanged, uniform wear was atrocious, seat belts were dangling unused, and there was
an obvious lack of attention to personal weight control.

We made a complete tour of the base, taking particular note of the air division headquarters, home to my boss, Brigadier General Pentard Dyer, or “Pen,” which he understandably insisted on. His was one of several tenant units I was responsible for supporting, the largest of which was an airlift wing with two squadrons of C-130s. As we passed that wing’s headquarters, I jotted down the commander’s name, Colonel John Butterfield, and put him high on my list of people to visit as I put my stamp on the 96th Bomb Wing.

My unit-in-waiting had a storied history, dating back to WWII as a bomb group. Flying from bases in England, over 900 of the wing’s airmen lost their lives in the skies over northern Europe. Inactivated after the war, the unit colors were restored at Dyess in late 1957. Besides its complement of B-47s and KC-97 tankers, the 96th was for a short while also home to an Atlas ICBM outfit, becoming a strategic aerospace wing. In the early sixties, the 96th transitioned to the B-52 and KC-135, a squadron for each, supported by five thousand military and civilian personnel.

Here, then, was the opportunity I had aspired to my entire career: command of a large flying organization on a premier base. The fact that it was in Strategic Air Command, the Air Force’s most powerful and prestigious fighting force, made it all the more special. It was also a case of being careful what you wish for. I needed all the experience, leadership and survival skills I could muster. This wing was in deep trouble, and I had a very short time to fix it. No more Mister Nice Guy.

The change of command ceremony, held on a large field across the street from the officers’ club, was remarkable only in the number of Nunleys in attendance; they turned out by the score, adding considerable color to the occasion. At the conclusion, in keeping with custom, the outgoing commander and his wife departed the base forthwith. He had headed the 96th Bomb Wing for five years, an unusually long stint that was not good for the unit. With a fresh perspective, I could see that he had long ago stopped looking closely at his facilities and his people. The “O” Club, where the post-ceremony reception was held, was a graphic case in point. While Dorene and I were standing in the receiving line, I noticed long runs of masking tape crisscrossing the mottled red carpet in the ballroom. Initially, I had presumed the tape was temporarily covering speaker wires, but on closer inspection it appeared it was actually holding the rug together. Alarm bells went off in my head. When the last guest passed through the line I took Dorene by the arm and we went on an impromptu tour that left us appalled.

It was painfully evident that the building was in gross disrepair. The heavy
red curtains were filthy, the furnishings were shoddy and out of date, the air was stale and musty, and the kitchen was a disgrace. I asked the head cook, Annie, greatly beloved, who had served the Club for decades, to open one of the ovens. The look on her face told me this was the first time in a long while, if ever, that anyone had bothered to check the cleanliness of her work area. I ran my finger along an interior edge and the grease piled up an inch thick. At that point I turned to the visibly nervous club officer who had hastily joined us and asked him to summon the base commander and the base veterinarian, both of whom arrived within minutes. I informed them that as of that moment the Club was closed and would remain so until I determined it was fit to entertain its members. Job One was for the cook to get the kitchen up to par. Sprucing up the remainder of the building, which was quite sizable, was going to be a huge self-help project since there were no earmarked funds in the base budget. This would be my first test of the Dyess officer corps, especially its senior leadership.

The news of my actions struck like summer lightning. I immediately called all of the tenant commanders to tell them what I had done and why and invite them and their officer cadres to join me and mine at a club members meeting in the ballroom the next afternoon. Shutting down a facility at the heart of daily eating routines and base social life was a momentous step, one I took very deliberately. Law and order were about to return to Dyess.

At my staff meeting the following morning, I introduced myself briefly, told my senior colonels I would be visiting each of them and their operations, starting within the hour, that I wanted no formal briefings, and that my objective was to tour every facility on the base in the next five days. Afterwards, I collected my vice commander, Bob Hyatt, my secretary, my executive officer and my wing senior NCO and told them they would see very little of me until I had completed my inspection of the base. They were all in a mild state of shock over this abrupt transition from my predecessor’s style and understandably uneasy about what might follow. I would more fully test their competence and loyalty later, but for the moment I had confidence from looking at their records that they could carry on with minimal supervision while I gauged the size of the challenge I had been given. It was worse than I could have imagined.

Just as I was about to set out on my tour, my hot line to the airlift wing rang, and I was greeted rather stiffly by John Butterfield. He was calling to ask my permission to leave a personal note in one of the VIP suites at the base guest house welcoming an old friend who was coming to visit. I said, “John, why the hell are you asking my permission for such a simple courtesy to your friend?” “Well, sir,” he replied, “that’s the way your predecessor did things.”
asked John if he was free just then, jumped in my staff car, and headed to his office a mile down the road, just off the flight line. Initially, he was startled that I would come to see him, then astonished when I told him that my predecessor’s rules no longer applied. My job was to support him and his mission. He ran my largest tenant and I intended to give that responsibility my full attention. I would need his help in getting the base squared away and, more importantly, during our respective ORIs we were each vitally dependent on the other for success. John was clearly gratified and promised to back me fully, a vow he made good on for the duration of my tour.

I started my staff visits with the DCO. The visit was not confidence-inspiring. He seemed ill at ease in my presence, wary, stiff and difficult to talk to. His staff struck me as largely lackluster and, even more disconcerting, his bomb squadron commander left me completely cold. By contrast, the tanker squadron CO appeared quick and on top of his game. My concerns were eased somewhat by my next stop, the alert facility, where an hour over lunch with the crews on duty left me satisfied with their spirit and morale.

My mood was lifted considerably as the day progressed, thanks to Tom Bainbridge, the DCM. Tom was engaging and deeply knowledgeable, as was his senior NCO, whom he whimsically introduced as “Frack,” Tom being “Frick.” He explained that the two of them did a lot of self-help projects together in the maintenance complex, which had earned them the nicknames. The term “self-help” got my attention, so on a hunch I asked Tom about the officers’ club. He confirmed that it was the victim of poor management, precious little oversight, and lack of funding both from higher headquarters and the local officer corps, many of whom had ignored their professional obligation to join. I told Tom that my plan was to kick off a major self-help effort at the officers’ call at the Club that afternoon and asked if he would head it up. He agreed without hesitation, genuinely eager to take on what would be a difficult task. We then departed for a look at his many facilities, starting with the huge hangars that housed the mission aircraft during heavy maintenance. I was instantly taken aback by the sight of hundreds of pigeons roosting in the rafters of every hangar, from whence they unleashed a continuous shower of droppings onto the people and aircraft below. Tom explained that the birds were protected under Texas law, so control measures were limited and largely ineffectual, creating disgusting working conditions and requiring an inordinate amount of time devoted to daily cleanup. I found that totally unacceptable and vowed to fix this problem no matter the legal risks or dollar costs.

At 4:00 p.m. Tom and I headed for the Club, where hundreds of officers were assembled in the Ball Room. I walked up on the stage and spent the next
half-hour talking about my leadership principles and standards, the demands of officership, my initial impressions of the base in general and the Club in particular, why I had closed it and my plan to get it into shape through self-help. I next introduced Tom, who said that on Saturday morning, two days hence, he and I and Dorene (his wife Dianne had remained in Omaha so their son would not have to change high schools) would be at the Club with ample cleaning supplies and assignment sheets for attacking various dimensions of the problem. Any and all help would be appreciated, free food would be provided, and the day would end with a beer bust and entertainment. He was direct, humorous and compelling, and his stock went way up with me and the audience. The test was forty-eight hours away, but I left feeling confident in the response.

I spent all of the next day and into the evening going in and out of scores of buildings, beginning with the airmen’s dormitories, which were in abysmal shape. Incredibly, in light of the Texas summers, they were not air conditioned, were poorly ventilated and lit, and were atrociously furnished. There was no pride of ownership, very few personal touches in the rooms and obvious neglect not only by the occupants but also by the base support agencies responsible for their upkeep. I was angry, embarrassed and ashamed that the troops were living in such rotten facilities, and I determined to fix them as a matter of first priority. In point of fact, they were only the tip of a base-sized iceberg. By the end of the day, it was clear that I was confronting an ingrained set of problems. Their scope, and my short timeline, would require a sweeping campaign, dramatic, merciless if need be, to instill an entirely new way of thinking and acting among the residents of Dyess Air Force Base. They had over the years acquired a mindset that was foreign to the principles I held most dear with respect to my profession and its obligations. This felt a lot more like Military Airlift Command than Strategic Air Command. I was about to declare war on my own organization.

During this first week, Dorene and I were staying at the base VIP quarters, arguably the nicest building at Dyess. A gift from the community, it had two well-appointed suites and was situated adjacent to the Club. Other than some minor maintenance issues, the room was tasteful and comfortable. Meanwhile, our quarters in the base housing area were being painted and repaired, work that Dorene monitored among other chores, such as visiting Lisa’s new high school. While finishing at Folsom, Lisa was staying with my former exec and trusted friend Bob Smith, and she would soon drive down with Brett and Stormy, via Hemet. We were all unaware of what the next year held in store. The callous policies of the Texas school system, a series of dire medical crises and a moribund base were about to create yet another perfect storm.
that would engulf our entire family. We were embarking on yet another year from Hell, one that would test each of us to the breaking point.

Saturday morning dawned bright and hot, finding Dorene and me already at the Club going over the morning’s work plan with Tom. He had done a superb job of breaking down the job ahead into a concrete room-by-room, task-by-task project. I walked through the building and around its grounds, checking every detail and adding one to the list. The bar lounge was a dark, dank, uninviting area that desperately needed some natural light. From the outside, I discovered a window that appeared to have once served the lounge, but that at some point had been covered with drywall and papered over. I put resurrecting the window high on the task list and headed back inside. At 8:00 a.m., a stream of officer volunteers of all ranks – and their spouses – began to arrive. As the crowd grew, I was increasingly heartened by the response: we were going to be able to put a big dent in a long list of improvements. The Base Commander and his terrific wife Eileen were, to their credit, among the first to show. I took him to the covered-up bar window and said I want it reopened by Monday morning – early Monday morning.

The day was a great success and spirits were high by evening, when we broke out the beer and food. The Club had been scrubbed clean, the curtains were gone, a small interior courtyard and fountain had been made habitable, a beautiful hardwood floor emerged from beneath the now discarded ball room carpet, and the kitchen was spotless – as were the bathrooms, where Carolyn Hyatt, wife of my vice commander, took charge. I declared the facility back in business, with a beaming Annie eager to retake possession and resume production of her famous chicken fried steak.

The next day I wrote the first of fifty-two weekly articles for the base newspaper in a new front-page feature called “Commander’s Corner.” I talked about my initial impressions of the base and the wing, the importance of our primary mission, the responsibility to get ready for the arrival of the B-1, barely a year away, the key roles of our tenant units, and the standards to which I would hold everyone accountable. I underscored the self-help refurbishment of the officers’ club as an example of getting the job done no matter the obstacles, pointing out that, “We are going to be the center of a great deal of attention in the coming months, and therefore must do whatever it takes to put our best foot forward.”

I discovered early Monday morning that the sense of urgency I was trying to convey had not taken hold. I went straight to the Club, expecting to find a contingent of carpenters from the base engineers opening up the bar window, but the place was a tomb. I called the base commander, his civilian deputy
96th Bomb Wing Commander (1983 – 1984)

base civil engineer, Floyd Ball, who was in charge of work-force scheduling, and the officer in charge of the Club. When they arrived, I gathered them in the lounge, stepped into an adjacent corridor and plucked a fire axe from the wall (a required item in every building in those days). Without a word, I walked over to the wall covering the window and swung the axe full force. A ray of blinding light surged through the opening, illuminating the startled faces of my audience. Looking straight at Floyd, I said, “I want this window fully restored and the room presentable by the end of the day. I’ll be back to inspect it at 5:00 p.m.”

By evening, as I anticipated, the story was all over the base. I could tell by my reception over the course of the day’s visits that the message was getting out. Furious notes were taken at every stop as I dictated what I wanted done now to start getting facilities into shape. To my delight, Floyd joined me on the tour, recording every word with a look of grim determination. I would soon come to appreciate that, along with Frick and Frack, I had found a powerful ally, an innovator whose initiative and energies had been frustrated for years. He joined me at the club at five, where we admired the restored window and the newly-carpeted floor. The transformed room quickly became a popular watering hole, filled to capacity every night.

By the end of the second week I had finished my facilities inspection, created a master repair plan with Floyd – beginning with the dormitories – moved into the commander’s quarters, and was back in my office digging into other indicators of discipline and performance. I had also had my first encounter with my air division commander, Pen Dyer. Midday Friday, I got a call on my mobile phone from an unidentified, irate voice I recognized as that of my one-star boss. “Butler,” he said, “I told the former commander this would happen if he didn’t get on it, and now we have a disaster on our hands. Get over to the eighteenth green and tell me what you’re going to do to fix it.” I surmised he meant the golf course, which is where I found him, hands on hips and very unhappy. As I walked up, he pointed at a patch of alien grass that had invaded the manicured green, an intrusion Pen took personally, given his well-known love for the game. I did my best to look concerned, figured that if this were all it would take to keep him happy we would get along fine, called Floyd and told him to make the problem go away.

Bob Hyatt had done a good job managing the headquarters, and began to earn my confidence. I asked him to take me through all of the SAC-mandated management control statistics, from the mundane stuff of suspense control, seat belt usage, traffic tickets, and physical fitness, to the more serious matters of on- and off-base crime and fatalities. The reports were uniformly awful,
providing more evidence of a base where standards no longer mattered. Paperwork was consistently late, few bothered with seat belts or obeyed speed limits, there was no weight management program to speak of, fights in the Airmen’s and NCO Clubs were common, many of them racially-inspired, and we were losing a person a month to fatal motorcycle accidents. This dismal litany, on top of the shabby uniforms and saluting practices everywhere evident, told me that rundown facilities were not my greatest problem. As I had suspected, and now confirmed, the core of these issues lay with leadership, at every level, from senior colonels, through seventeen squadron commanders and first sergeants, to scores of lower-level supervisors, military and civilian. I had a wholesale reeducation and training challenge on my hands.

I spent my second weekend crafting my response to that challenge: Colonel Butler’s “Back to Basics” Program, a return to fundamentals that would touch every person on Dyess and, as it turned out, many folks in the local communities as well. By Sunday night I had an article ready for Tuesday’s newspaper, and I spent Monday briefing my senior staff and tenant commanders on what it would say. John Butterfield was elated at the prospect of his host unit getting its act together, believing his own troops were already squared away. He was right for the most part although not immune, I suspected, to the issues of racism and drugs that lurked in every corner of Dyess and infected Abilene as well.

The Tuesday paper hit like a bombshell. Back to Basics would kick off with a host of new programs underpinned by severe penalties for noncompliance. Those overweight would, after a medical evaluation, begin a daily, one-hour exercise program at the base gym that started at 4:30 a.m. No one involved would attend professional schools (an overweight Dyess sergeant had been turned away at the NCO Academy) or go on temporary duty to other locations until their weight met standard. Anyone not using a seat belt would lose base driving privileges: a month for the first offense, a year for the second. Every person operating a motorcycle would have to complete an on-base training program before being allowed to use Dyess roadways. Anyone committing an act of racial, sexual or religious intolerance would be brought up on charges and, if I could make it stick, have their service terminated. Then came the clincher. Twelve days hence, on a Saturday morning beginning at 7:00, I would conduct a wing-wide in-ranks inspection of every person not in a hospital bed or deployed. Squadron commanders would walk at my shoulder. Tenant commanders were strongly encouraged to conduct parallel inspections of their people at the same time.

A panic ensued as many folks realized they did not even possess some of
the uniform items I directed to be worn – all of which were required by regulation to be in every professional wardrobe. The base clothing sales store inventory was depleted overnight. John Butterfield told me he was besieged with requests for his crews to buy clothing items at other bases around the country where his C-130s traveled daily. As I had hoped, John had readily agreed to turn his people out for inspection, as did every other tenant commander. However, the whining in my unit increased by the day, and I kept close track of who was on board and who was ducking for cover. The sorting out process had begun.

My first call from the community came from mayor E E. Hall’s wife, of all people. It seemed that her house cleaner was the wife of a 96th BMW NCO. She had been stopped for not wearing a seatbelt, thereby losing her driving privileges, unable to get to the Halls’ residence for her cleaning duties. “Surely,” she asked, “I could make one teeny little exception.” “Sorry,” I replied, “but this unit has been nothing but exceptions for years, precisely the problem I am trying to fix, not to mention saving lives and limbs.” I’m sure she was taken aback by my refusal, but she professed to understand my reasoning. As I had anticipated, the news was soon all over the city. Within a week, the Back to Basics program made the front page in the Abilene Reporter-News and earned a call from the editor, Frank Puckett, for a personal interview I was happy to grant. It was time the town better understood who I was and what I was about. The vaunted ties between city and base were going to suffer a test that far surpassed house cleaners getting to work.

June, July and August were consumed by my efforts to learn the base and its problems, institute the Back to Basics program, spend some quality time with local civic leaders and get preparations underway for the looming B-1 construction agenda, which would entail hundreds of millions of dollars and disrupt the life of the base for months to come. In late August, Lisa’s school year started with a thud. As she was a newcomer to Abilene, her previous advanced-placement grades were not recognized. Further, during her first year, she could not take any AP courses, be in Honor Society, try out for cheerleader or participate in varsity sports. These restrictions were the consequence of widespread abuses in the Texas school system: outstanding athletes and students from small towns were being recruited by large city schools using a local relative’s address to mask a phony residence. The one-year holding pattern was designed to discourage these practices, but at the expense of innocent bystanders such as military children and other transient children. Lisa was devastated and we were outraged. To address this wholesale discrimination, Dorene made an appointment with the principal, an arrogant, insensitive lug who had
just been moved to the front office from coaching the football team. He was unresponsive to her pleas for equitable treatment, and to her expressed determination to go to the mayor, the local Congressman or Texas Senator John Tower, if necessary. When she added Texan Vice President Bush to the list, he finally caved, agreeing to take a hard look at the problem. He did, but the fix came too late for Lisa. She was stuck with mediocre classes and teachers, barred from participating in preferred activities, and thrown in with a bunch of cliquish kids who were disdainful of schoolmates from Dyess. This triggered a downward spiral in her morale which over the course of the next several months brought us to the brink of despair. Our happy-go-lucky daughter was turning inward, and we felt helpless as her spirits steadily declined.

Dorene, meanwhile, was trying to get her arms around the cause of bad blood between the bomb wing and airlift wing wives. It called to mind the second line from the Abilene ditty, “The women there will treat you mean.” The problem arose from personal slights aimed at John Butterfield’s wife in the past. The upshot was a paucity of contact between the two units, professional and social. Dorene began a quiet campaign to mend relations, beginning with one-on-one meetings, then with small gatherings of trusted agents, telling them forthrightly that she needed their support. To their great credit, they responded to a person. At the right point, Dorene staged another of her follies, an initiative greeted with enthusiasm by women all across the base. She found a strong friend and ally in Robin Matthews, whose husband, Paul, the vice commander of the tenant airlift wing, was a SAC comer serving a career-broadening tour in Military Airlift Command. Robin was irrepressible. High energy, enthusiastic and multi-talented, she did a Joan Rivers sketch for the follies that was worthy of a professional.

Dorene had also begun to take the measure of the base support functions, providing me with invaluable insights on areas I had not yet probed in depth. Her inputs led to major initiatives to get the commissary and BX upgraded, a new Child Care Center completed, and new life put into numerous other family-oriented activities. She was also my principal weapon in tamping down fires in the civilian community, where her Texas roots made her an easy fit. Her role grew as my Back to Basics campaign began to make bigger waves off base. They became a tsunami after I discovered that some Abilene night spots were denying entry to my black and Latino airmen. I got the OSI involved, documented where, when, and how, and then asked Fred Lee Hughes, the head of the Military Affairs Committee, to come to my office, where I presented the evidence. I told him that if the city did not put a stop to this immediately, I would put every club in Abilene off-limits to military personnel – a step that
would sink many of them. Fred Lee took the issue very seriously. The matter was resolved within a week. Message sent and received: there would be no double standard for my people on-base or off. Not everyone in Abilene accustomed to dealing with the base took kindly to my actions, even some of its leading citizens, but they all understood clearly I was a force to be reckoned with and would not be deterred from protecting my people.

By the end of September, I was presiding over a volatile stew of hurt feelings, anger, and resentment. Other than Bob Hyatt, Tom Bainbridge, and now Gary Walton, the base commander, I did not sense much loyalty from my staff, whom I pressured constantly. Things came to a head in a bloody confrontation with the bomb squadron commander. It was precipitated by a visit to me by the squadron chief of standardization-evaluation, responsible for ensuring the proper training and testing of the crew force. He requested a private meeting, not privy to the squadron commander or the DCO. I knew from having flown with him that he was a man of great integrity, so his request signaled something seriously amiss. He informed me that the squadron commander had been late completing a testing requirement and had ordered him to backdate the exam to avoid embarrassment. He had refused, and so the commander had altered the date himself. Perfect. I now had an opportunity for a public hanging.

After examining the test, with its forged date, I called the DCO to advise him of what I had learned and to tell him that I intended to relieve the squadron commander on the spot. He was flabbergasted, sputtering that we were due an ORI sometime before the end of the year, probably in December, and that left little time to get a new commander on board and up to speed. The upshot was that he didn’t think it was that big a deal; I could see that he was more worried about his own future than the commander’s lack of integrity. I told him that I already had a replacement in hand, a recently-promoted lieutenant colonel in the squadron in whom I had developed strong confidence during multiple interactions. With that, I called the commander to my office, confronted him with the facts, which he acknowledged, and fired him.

As October arrived, I got a call from my new three-star boss, Lieutenant General Jim Light, saying he was coming to visit. Light, who had replaced the now-retired General Murphy, was a SAC veteran who had made a name for himself in the logistics business. I did not know him but quickly came to appreciate his savvy and experience. Making his initial rounds of the units in 15th Air Force, he would be in and out in a day. I met his airplane, took him to my office and gave him a candid assessment of my unit, its problems and what I was doing about it. Having followed the B-1’s history for many years, he was happy to
have it coming to his command and was particularly interested in our preparations for its arrival. After our discussion, I took him on a tour of key facilities beginning, at his request, with the supply squadron, which was spread out in two adjacent, cavernous buildings that housed the thousands of parts and pieces required to keep the base, its aircraft, structures and people functioning. I stopped at the east door of the first building and told the NCO who met us to reposition the car at the west end of the second. I followed General Light on a walkthrough that took ten minutes at best. As we exited and stepped into the car, he said simply, “Your supply outfit is in serious trouble; I doubt you have time to get it fixed before the ORI, but give it your best shot.” Although I did not yet have the experience to know what he had seen that led to such a dire prediction, events proved him right on both counts: the supply squadron was being very poorly run, and I didn’t have time to fix it. The ORI hit three weeks after his departure, which was two months before we had anticipated. As intended, it was a complete surprise.

The call from the command post came just as I walked into morning staff meeting. The IG was on final approach with his team of one hundred inspectors. Although I had been through one practice session soon after taking the helm and had confidence in the crew force and aircraft, I was not at all certain about the several other inspections that would take place in the next ten days: Nuclear Surety, Disaster Preparedness, Facilities Readiness, Post-Launch Deployment, as well as dozens of checks on administrative practices. However, having been through two ORIs at Griffiss and three at Mather, I was now a seasoned battle staff commander and had read every ORI Report on SAC bomb wings for the past two years. I knew how to generate my bombers and tankers to their wartime configuration and how to deal with the multiple problems the IG would introduce into the process. Between myself, my trusty DCM and my several excellent squadron commanders, I was confident we could pull this off. And indeed, the critical generation phase went very smoothly. Tom was a stalwart, and the new bomb squadron commander did himself proud getting his crews on alert status. The subsequent simulated Emergency War Order launch was flawless, as was the downloading and return of nuclear weapons to their storage bunkers. After a brief respite came the moment of truth: the actual launch of the aircraft for their mock wartime missions. During what I knew was probably my last time in the barrel, I marveled at the skill of the pilots in getting seventeen bombers and a like number of tankers in the air with just seconds between them. As the last plane lifted off and folded its gear, I returned to the Battle Staff for one last bit of IG business involving post-launch deployment of people and equipment to their wartime recovery locations. The
first step in that process was to deal with a nuclear effects problem emanating
from a presumed attack on the base. For my scenario, the IG team chief includ-
ed a wrinkle for which I was well prepared, having read a different IG team’s
report of an inspection just prior to mine that included a similar perturbation.

Once this final exercise was complete, I was ready for a breather while
waiting for the return of the aircraft and their refueling and bombing scores.
However, the team chief took me aside to alert me to a “problem” with the
nuclear-effects calculations we had just completed. That got my undivided at-
tention, because it called into question my leadership of the battle staff; any
“problem” would reflect directly on me. After hearing him out, I was puzzled
and angry. My calculations were precisely according to the solutions laid out as
correct in the report rendered by the sister IG team, a fact I of course pointed
out. The team chief responded that he disagreed with the other team leader’s
judgment and would grade me according to his own interpretation. I judged
that unacceptable, told him so, and – even though it was now midnight – I got
the SAC IG on the phone at Offutt and apprised him of the situation. He asked
me to put his team chief on the line, who confirmed my recitation of events,
listened intently for a moment and then handed me the telephone. The SAC
IG then apologized for the confusion, validated my decisions, assured me the
report would be clean in that regard, and said he would get his team chiefs on
the same page the next day.

I was briefly concerned that I might have won a battle at the expense of
losing the war, since there were still eight days of inspection to come, but
the team chief took his reversal in stride and played fair right to the end. The
good news is that we got through the flying phase and nuclear weapons man-
age evaluations with an “Excellent.” Other aspects of the visit were not,
including the supply squadron which, as predicted, received a marginal rating.
Overall, however, given the circumstances of absolutely no advance warning
and therefore no stealthy preparation, my unit had acquitted itself well, as
had the airlift wing which had supported the deployment phase like champs.
The customary outbrief was held in the base theater, with a standing-room-
only crowd representing all mission elements in attendance, as well as Pen
Dyer and a handful of key civilians from Abilene. It was a decent report card,
but in my remarks following the departure of the IG Team, I let it be known
that I was far from satisfied. As the future home of the B-1, our goal was to be
“Outstanding” across the board. We had a road map in the IG Report on how
to get there, and the heat would be up full blast until we did.

With that test behind us, I now came down on the wing with both feet.
I instituted a series of face-to-face meetings to ensure that every person on
Dyess heard me directly: monthly newcomers’ orientation, monthly breakfasts with my seventeen squadron commanders to vet problems, share solutions, and standardize punishments for similar infractions, monthly speeches to the NCO Academy graduates, theater sessions with the civilian work force, and unrelenting pressure at my daily staff meetings. I began to see progress, and I won a small but telling victory thanks to a near-tragic accident involving a civilian secretary. While stopped at a red light just before driving onto the base, she had remembered to fasten the seat belt dangling at her shoulder. As she entered the intersection with the green light, she was struck broadside by a drunk driver who had run the light at full tilt. Although shaken and bruised, she was otherwise unhurt, and she made it a point to thank me personally and allow her story to be published in the newspaper. The motorcycle training program had also taken hold and deaths had fallen to zero. On other fronts, more and more folks came off the weight control program, people were dressing properly and saluting like they meant it. I was getting to their hearts as well as to their minds.

Next, Frick and Frack took up my challenge to create a VIP lounge at Base Ops, which they did in one week flat. Dorene assisted with the furnishings and decorating, helping the team pull off a minor miracle. Many more were needed. During the ribbon cutting, one of the young airmen pulling duty at the front counter casually asked Dorene if she knew what Dyess stood for. Not certain of his point, she said, “No, what?” “Did You Expect Such Shit,” he replied with a smirk. Leave it to the troops: they would be my best gauge of real progress.

Now came the real challenge: the dormitories. I had been pushing Floyd Ball and the squadron commanders hard to spruce them up by self-help until SAC Headquarters released the out-of-cycle construction money. I now entered the fray personally, getting new mattresses and curtains into the rooms and making sure that every wall had a fresh coat of paint. These were cosmetic steps, but they made a big difference in appearance and morale. Finally, I turned my attention to a upcoming visit by General Davis, the SAC commander. I spent a great deal of time building his itinerary, selecting the facilities I wanted him to see, setting up an intimate dinner with the city leadership in the VIP quarters, and otherwise accounting for every minute of his stay. Dorene addressed Pat Davis’ agenda with equal attention, being sure to include time with John Butterfield’s wife and a contingent of spouses from his unit.

The remainder of the tour worked according to plan. General Davis saw what I was dealing with, promised to free up money to keep things moving, was pleased with B-1 preparations, and liked the feel of the base in general.
When he casually inquired about the pigeon problem in the maintenance hangars, which he must have noticed on a visit before my time, I told him I had engaged the services of my deputy civil engineer Floyd Ball, a world-class skeet shooter. Problem solved. He laughed and said simply, “Good.” At the evening event, things could not have gone better. General Davis was in good spirits, his wife Pat had had a terrific day, Fred Lee was magnificent, and Annie’s food was spectacular. Stories and gifts were exchanged, things ended on schedule, and we put the CINC and his lady on their plane for a late flight back to Offutt. We were deeply gratified by the performance of everyone involved, and I felt good about my organization. As the year entered its final month, I could sense a positive change of direction. Whatever the next year might hold, I would put 1983 in the books as the highlight of my career, a sense of accomplishment that was enhanced in mid-January of 1984 by selection for brigadier general. I was by turn exceedingly happy, professionally gratified, and eagerly anticipating what the future would hold. What I did not anticipate was a series of family traumas that would bring me back down to earth, requiring all of the physical and emotional reserves Dorene and I could muster.

The city of Abilene was also buoyed by my promotion, the first for a Dyess commander. It was front-page stuff for the Reporter-News, Lisa’s spirits were lifted and Brett was proud of his dad, whose mail box overflowed with letters of congratulation. The base was swept up in the wave of emotion, many believing, correctly, that their willingness to get on board the Back to Basics Program and pull the wing up by its boot straps had contributed to my good fortune. After a few days, however, the hubbub died down, and we got back to the business at hand. Then, on the 18th of January, just after midnight, came a phone call. Dorene’s oldest brother, Jim, had died.

We were shocked at the news, even knowing that things had not gone well for Jim and his younger brother, Buddy, in recent months. They had both worked for the same company for years, eventually becoming part-owners. They built the business and made good money — too good. They lost their financial and emotional bearings, becoming estranged from their family and friends. Jim moved in with J.O. and Veda in Hemet, became a recluse, and steadily dissipated. Buddy kept to himself, and we knew little of his circumstances. Jim’s former wife Mary and their three children, Jimmy, Judy and Jerry, were devastated, as was Dorene, who dearly loved her brothers.

Jim’s death took a terrible toll on his parents, but, as was their nature, one they tried to mask. J.O., with his tough, Texas persona, showed little emotion, keeping his pain tightly bottled up. Veda was, as always, a rock, drawing on
her Catholic faith to bear her grief. She was as saintly a woman as ever graced the planet.

After the funeral, the grieving parents flew to San Antonio, where they were joined by Dorene and Brett, who drove them around central Texas to visit their living siblings. Shortly after arriving in Lubbock to visit with Pat and Morris Nunley, Dorene fielded a call from Buddy’s doctor in California. Her other brother was failing, and her parents needed to return forthwith. After they departed, Dorene flew back to Dyess with a heavy heart. Two weeks later came a second midnight call. Buddy had joined his brother in death.

While the news was not unexpected, this successive shock was no less painful for knowing that Buddy, like Jim, had fallen on bad times that took him to his grave. Once again, we gathered ourselves and struggled through a second round of mourning, this time with Buddy’s family, who were overcome with grief. J.O. and Veda were adrift in a roiling sea of despair that not even faith could calm. Dorene shouldered the load for all of them, from service to graveside. Knowing how her older brothers had doted on her since the day she was born, I understood the depth of her loss, but I really did not know how to comfort her.

Back home once more, we put on a brave face, stepped back into our daily routines and pressed on with the business of running the wing. And then, just as the emotional fog was beginning to lift, came yet another late-night phone call. I recognized my mother’s voice, choked with grief. Grady had passed away not an hour before, dead from a stroke that took him without warning.

I was caught completely off guard. Although my father was a heavy drinker and had smoked for decades, he was still capable of hard physical labor, seemed in good spirits and was actively engaged in his responsibilities as justice of the peace of Yalobusha County. As I had never been remotely close to my father, his death had little impact on me; however, it was a heavy blow for my mother, and my sister, Anne, was inconsolable. It fell to me to sift through the emotional wreckage, get our father in the ground, and deal with my mother’s circumstances as a widow in that insular little southern town, clearly sliding toward oblivion. When I arrived on the scene, after an arduous trip from Abilene, the Oakland I had known was barely recognizable. Crumbling buildings, unkempt yards, slovenly people, hardly a store still in business – the place was a slum. Worse, the dividing lines between blacks and whites were as sharply drawn as they had ever been, despite heroic efforts by my parents to improve the lot of the “Negro” population, in their roles as justice of the peace and alderwoman.

I said some words at the service, but remember none of them nor what
my sister, Anne, or brother, Bill, might have said. The cemetery proved to be presentable, thanks to my mother, who had created a fund to ensure that the family plots weren’t overrun with weeds. Graveside was a blur, long forgotten, but the aftermath was a bit of comic relief – the family gathered around the kitchen table and poking gentle fun at our father and his foibles. That evening, I took my mother aside and made a pact that within the next five years she would find greener pastures. It only required three. Bill’s marriage failed, he bought a vacation home in the mountains two hours north of New York City, our mother joined him, and stayed in his loving company until the end of her days.

I returned to Dyess, to find that I was about to begin a round of schooling tied to my forthcoming promotion. The first was a two-week Air Force orientation program for new brigadier generals, dubbed Charm School. I left for Washington, D.C., within days of returning from Oakland, moved into the VOQ at Bolling AFB, and attended a week-long series of briefings in the Pentagon. The opening presentation was a cautionary tale about past general officer misconduct, especially newly-minted brigadiers running afoul of the Uniform Code of Military Justice by abusing their newfound authority. High on the list of infractions was mistreating subordinates, most particularly sexual abuse, a behavior which I found infuriating. To have colonels engaging in this behavior was bad enough, but for general officers to be pawing subordinates was even more despicable.

The second week was spent on the road visiting major command headquarters, a chance to see many of the Air Force four-star generals up close and personal. Of those, only one made a lasting impression: General W. L. Creech, the commander of Tactical Air Command headquartered at Langley AFB, Virginia. His presentation was spellbinding, an hour-long recitation of his vision, mission, organization, management tools and leadership principles, portrayed on brilliantly crafted slides, and delivered without notes. For my part, I took copious notes, which I filed away with my lore gleaned at General Brown’s side in Vietnam. In seven years my trove of knowledge would stand me in great stead.

While in D.C., I was told that I had been selected as one of seven from my group of fifty promotees to attend the inaugural class of CAPSTONE, a joint-service orientation course, mandated by the Congress in the Goldwater-Nichols Act (about which more later; it was a watershed piece of legislation) to force the military services into greater collaboration. Taught at the National War College at Fort McNair, the storied Army post in southeast Washington, this was a much longer and more serious program, six weeks in duration, including
extensive foreign travel. I was gratified to be chosen but concerned about being away from my command and my family for what was becoming a very lengthy absence. Present for duty or not, the wing was still my responsibility, and leaving Dorene to deal with Lisa’s unhappiness by herself was tantamount to desertion.

I had only a brief interval back at Dyess before returning to the nation’s capital for CAPSTONE. I left with a heavy heart. While the wing was running smoothly, my family was in turmoil. I moved back into Visiting Officers Quarters at Bolling, rented a car and commuted daily to the War College, where I found myself among an extraordinary group of twenty companions, plus three retired four-star generals, one each from the Air Force, Army and Navy, serving as our joint overseers, and the very talented faculty members who were pioneering the new course. The Air Force and Army had each sent seven of their newest flag officers, the Navy six and the Marines one. I came to like and admire them all. This proved to be a marvelous experience, broadening and inspiring from start to finish. Building on my experience at the Armed Forces Staff College in 1973, I became an even more committed proponent of “jointness,” a mindset that served me and my profession extremely well in the years to come. While a diverse flying and staff background had made me expert in most aspects of Air Force doctrine and operational lore, I was by no means a zealot. Far from it. I despised the petty interservice rivalries I had encountered in the field – Vietnam being the low point – and in the Pentagon.

Absorbed as I was by the fast-paced curriculum, the prospect of my next assignment was pushed to the back of my mind. The answer came in a phone call while I was in England, on the last leg of a swing through Western Europe visiting U. S. military headquarters and installations. I had just walked into my hotel room in London at 9:00 p.m., to be greeted by a flashing red message light on my phone. A clipped British voice informed me that General Davis had called and wanted a call back as soon as possible, but on a secure line. I went back down to the lobby, hailed a cab and was off to the American Embassy, where the Marine guard responded to my plea to let me use a secure phone. I took a moment to gather myself and dialed the CINC’s private number. General Davis picked up, exchanged a few pleasantries, and then said, “Lee, I’m bringing you to my headquarters to be the SAC Inspector General. We’ll have a pinning ceremony on the first of July. Look forward to having you and Dorene on board.” There it was. The last position in the world I had expected, but one which upon reflection made great sense. I was one of SAC’s most experienced wing commanders, had passed several ORIs, taken the heat of crisis and confrontation, and had a spouse who knew by heart the words to the CINC’s
favorite song, “Faded Love.” It was the perfect job.

When I called Dorene with the news, she was consumed by yet another family crisis. His spring semester finished, Brett had stopped by Dyess on his way to Fort Benning, Georgia, where he had a slot to attend the Army Airborne Course, the same program I had completed just prior to my senior year at the Academy. However, shortly after his arrival in Abilene, he had suffered a collapsed lung and was in the Dyess hospital, his dream of jump school over and his health in serious jeopardy. While his condition was stable, he was not recovering normally, so he was confined to a hospital bed. Since he was in good hands – and because he and Lisa insisted – Dorene and I decided she would join me in Washington upon my return from Europe, to participate in a several spousal activities during the last week of CAPSTONE.

Dorene and I were overjoyed to be back in each other’s company. She enjoyed the spouse program, and we had shared in a number of useful activities. The most intriguing of these was a Myers-Briggs personality assessment. This sort of profiling was new to us and was most revealing of our ingrained preferences. I was struck by the methodology and its purpose of building better leaders through greater self-awareness. It confirmed my strong introversion, intuitiveness, ordered reasoning and preference for structure, or I-N-T-J, in Myers-Briggs parlance. Interestingly, this combination of traits predominated among general officers. My classmates were surprised at the strong “I” component of my profile, testimony to my practice, going back to Academy days, of masking my insularity in order to enhance my leadership skills. That charade came at a steep price. Maintaining a public persona that departed so sharply from my inner comfort zone was at the expense of my emotional stamina and my capacity for affection and close friendship. Whatever professional advantage I may have gained forestalled greater intimacy with my wife and children and camaraderie with my peers. Twenty-three years had passed since Academy graduation, and I was still not much fun. That role fell to Dorene and her E-N-F-J extroverted, empathetic personality that did so much to soften my hard edges.

On the next to last day of the course, we got word that Brett’s condition had worsened, and that he had been airlifted to the large regional hospital in San Antonio. Dorene left immediately, flying directly to Texas. I participated in the graduation ceremony the next day, returned to Dyess, and drove down to join her. She was nearly undone, tired, worried sick, and outraged at the sub-par care our son was receiving. Brett had gone through a traumatic surgery to repair, reattach and manually re-inflate his lung. He was in severe pain, thirsty and sleep-deprived, but no one serving his ward seemed to give a damn.
Dorene called our dear friend, Jim Weaver, now a colonel at a nearby base, who intervened with the hospital commander, whereupon things improved considerably. After a few more days of recuperation, Brett was flown back to Dyess, where he joined us as we were taking down the curtains and packing for the move to Offutt. I had returned to Dyess from my schooling to the change of command ceremony, preceded by a round of farewell functions with the community and the wing. The speeches and gifts were moving and thoughtful. Our friends in Abilene had outdone themselves, commissioning a new cattle brand in our honor, the “Star B,” with an iron to match, nicely mounted on a piece of native Texas wood. We had grown very fond of Fred Lee, his wife Wanda, his lifelong friend and Aggie roommate, Jimmie Tittle, publisher Frank Puckett, and a number of other locals, especially former mayor E. E. Hall, one of the kindest, most courtly gentlemen on God’s earth. “Double E,” as he was universally known, and his wife took a particular liking to Dorene, seeking her out at every function to share some story or just savor her company.

Despite the professional challenges and family hardships, we left Dyess with a sense of accomplishment, a host of happy moments and life-long friends, and an air of hopeful anticipation that was soon realized. As we settled in at Offutt, Dorene paid a visit to the principal of Bellevue West High School, where Lisa would start her senior year. After reviewing her record, he sent a personal letter of welcome, assuring her that she would face no restrictions, academic or otherwise. We were also thrilled with our new home, Quarters Ten on Generals’ Row, one of the stately three-story brick homes built by the Army Corps of Engineers at the turn of the last century. But, there was a downside; Dorene suddenly found herself alone. I went on the road, Lisa was in France on a study program, Brett was off to Virginia and Stormy was sick. Truth be told, Dorene had longed for a return to Washington. But Offutt proved a turning point; our two years there dictated the course of our lives to the present day.
The drive from Dyess to Offutt AFB was short and uneventful. We arrived on Thursday, June 30, and checked into Quarters 13, which was configured for short-term officer visits. My promotion ceremony to brigadier general was scheduled for Friday afternoon, when I would share the stage with Brigadier General Harley Hughes, a friend and colleague from F-4 days at Cam Ranh Bay. He was now being elevated to his second star and sent back to Washington, where he would soon earn another star and take charge of Plans and Operations (XO) on the Air Staff. The assignment gods would keep our paths intertwined; two years hence I would trace his footsteps to the Pentagon and report for duty in his operations directorate.

General Davis conducted the promotion ritual, pinning a star on my left shoulder while Dorene did the honors on the right. As a newcomer to the SAC staff, I took care to keep my remarks short and modest. I was equally mindful that as the Inspector General of SAC, I was vested with special trust and responsibility, reporting directly to the CINC on the combat readiness of his units. As IG, I would hold sway over the reputations and careers of every soul in an organization of global scope and possessed of immense power. Personal integrity was crucial to my credibility and authority, and the foundation of balanced, objective evaluations by my three large teams of inspectors. I knew all too well that inspections impose heavy stress on units and drive the morale of the command for good or for ill. As the reader knows, I had experienced at Dyess the contentiousness that can arise from lack of consistent standards and arrived at my new post with a number of fixes and innovations in mind for the system I had endured. However, I also had great respect for the process and for those charged with its implementation. Moreover, I had a lot to learn about the Inspector General’s responsibilities, which encompassed much more than assessing the performance of SAC’s operational units and staffs.

We fell in love with our new home the minute we walked in the door. It was captivatingly elegant, with high ceilings, tile fireplaces, and handsome
woodwork. A large basement underpinned the upper three floors, its size essential to housing the large stash of coal that had originally fueled the six fireplaces. Our possessions fit perfectly, and we felt very much at home in our new surroundings. Life along “The Row,” as this cluster of quarters was known, would prove comfortable, even homey, although I would not get to experience very much of it. My principal role was to gauge the combat readiness of units of the Strategic Air Command; given its far-flung set of bases, my life would be spent on the road.

I was plunged into that role immediately, leaving Dorene alone in a big house – with a very sick Stormy, Brett in Virginia visiting friends, Lisa still in France, no new friends as yet, and feeling blue. I could see her distress, but with thirty-six major installations to inspect, my teams were constantly on the move, and I wanted to be present during the first few days of each evaluation. My other responsibilities, alluded to above, were also demanding: briefing inspection results to the CINC and his senior staff; flying, missile, ground and nuclear safety; the command-wide complaint system; and publishing a monthly magazine: *Combat Crew*.

I had another notable duty, one that I shared with most other SAC generals: pulling a 24-hour tour once a month as Airborne Emergency Actions Officer (AEAO) aboard a specially configured EC-135 aircraft. In the event of a nuclear war in which ground-based command, control and communications centers were rendered inoperable, authority to carry out an authenticated execution order from the National Command Authority (the President and the Secretary of Defense) passed by devolution to the AEAO. As the youngest SAC general following my promotion, I invariably pulled the late-night shift on weekends and holidays, onerous duty, but one that stood me in good stead by introducing me to the complexities of the SIOP, or Single Integrated Operations Plan. I fully understood the concept from my days as a SAC wing commander, responsible for my small piece of the SIOP, but now I began to grasp the enormity of a wholesale execution and the associated risks and consequences. This was the beginning of an education that would ultimately lead me to question the entire nuclear weapon enterprise.

I soon learned that briefing General Davis required a deft touch. He had a short fuse, was bright as hell, competitive to a fault, and held his senior staff brutally accountable when my teams determined that the cause of a major problem fell within their domain. With respect to the broad safety portfolio, while I had a good grasp of air operations, the ICBM world was uncharted territory; overseeing the daily operations of a major air command added an entirely new dimension to my professional knowledge. This was demanding duty
that could serve up intense crises at the drop of a hat, especially with 10,000 strategic nuclear warheads in the mix.

I also knew the complaint management drill, but the volume of “out-of-channel” letters that crossed my desk was startling. Their resolution was usually onerous and time-consuming for my staff of trusted officers and enlisted men and women. Being the court of last resort for plaintiffs who did not trust their chain of command, we were duty-bound to guard the privacy of every letter and resolve every issue. The most appalling aspect of my complaint mailbag was the number of cases involving senior officer misconduct. It was a problem I would have to deal with for the remainder of my career.

Finally, being in the publishing business was an entirely new experience, albeit one I came to relish and rely on for getting my values, standards and expectations to every corner of the Strategic Air Command. In sum, the power of my office was enormous; it was a direct extension of the authority and responsibility of the CINCSAC. From that perspective, I had been given two golden opportunities. The most immediate was to help General Davis lift SAC to new heights of professionalism and performance. The second – which might have figured into the thinking of the Air Force leadership, but certainly not into mine – was to prepare for the day when I would become its Commander-in-Chief.

The staff I joined was a mixed bag of soaring talent, steady professionals, and a few hangers-on. The Vice CINC chair was filled shortly after my arrival by Lieutenant General Bill Campbell, a highly regarded three-star with a sterling career in high-performance aircraft, and in test and development, where he pioneered the peerless SR-71. That operations background was buttressed by a SAC wing commander role and senior Air Staff jobs in the Pentagon. Having been put in the Vice CINC chair, he was viewed by many as the logical candidate to succeed General Davis following the latter’s retirement the following June. Tough-minded, smart, and brimming with confidence, he struck me as a splendid choice for that responsibility, a judgment facilitated by the fact that he and his wife, Peggy, became our new duplex mates on The Row. That led to a close friendship and a new patron, who took an interest in me and my future. Dorene and I liked the Campbells very much and spent many happy hours at their kitchen table, enjoying their company, playing bridge and learning from their running commentary on life at SAC Headquarters.

The SAC Headquarters chief of staff, Major General John Brashear, was a solid but highly cautious career SAC officer, who would later assign me one of the most intense tasks I had seen since my fire-brigade years in the Pentagon. The DCS for Plans, Major General Jim McCarthy, and his wife Alice, arrived within weeks of us; they became good friends as well. Jim was among the four
or five two-star generals thought to be on the inside track to become CINCSAC five years down the road following the departure of General Davis’ successor. Others included Major General Bob Beckel, a 1959 AFA graduate, the DCS for Operations, and his classmate, Major General H. T. Johnson, who replaced him in the fall of 1985. Any of them would have made a highly competent CINCSAC, in my view; however, a set of powerful forces, including a tragic accident, would intervene to break the expected line of succession – and set the stage for a most unlikely new candidate.

My IG office staff, though small, was dedicated, responsible and expert. My secretary, Ruth Hansen, was wise in the ways of the headquarters and my deputy, Colonel Ron Wink, was a former team chief who had presided over one of my inspections at Mather AFB. I soon came to like and respect them both. That relationship was particularly important since Ron ran the office during my peripatetic travels. I soon lost Ruth to the front office, replacing her with Clarine Pollock, who would become a friend for life to me and Dorene. Finally, my little band of complaint managers was all I could ask for.

The three inspection teams were a mix of up-and-coming talent and seasoned professionals, many of whom were on their last tour of active duty. The team chiefs, however, were not the caliber I wanted. The head of the missile team was a former missile wing commander, long in the tooth and sour of disposition. The two aircraft unit inspection heads, each a full colonel in charge of a complement of some one hundred evaluators, were unimpressive; one was downright irritating. A former bomb wing commander, disappointed over not being promoted to brigadier general, he was an arrogant know-it-all who took no pains to disguise his disdain for me. As I read over his team’s past inspection reports, I was angered by his habit of criticizing wing commanders by name, a task best left for private discussions between the CINC by the IG – that is, me. One of my first initiatives was to prohibit such written references. I made absolutely clear that this was a cardinal rule – enforcing it created my first opportunity for a public hanging.

The very next week, the colonel in my crosshairs and his team inspected an Air National Guard KC-135 tanker unit based at O’Hare Field in Chicago. This was one of several Guard and Reserve outfits that had long shared the responsibility for global refueling with the active-duty SAC tanker forces. Inspecting ANG forces required some discretion because, in peacetime, they had dual chains of command, one through their state’s governor, and the other through the Chief, Air National Guard, who headed the Guard Bureau in the Pentagon. Most of these units were largely populated by former active-duty folks with years, if not decades, of experience. Consequently, problems were rare and
most ANG units received an “Outstanding” inspection rating, and much the same could be said of the Air Force Reserve units we inspected. In this particular instance, a hiccup occurred during one of the Guard unit’s battle staff exercises. The matter could readily have been handled offline, but the team leader instead flagged it in the team’s report, referencing the unit commander by name. Because I was on the road with the missile inspection team, I did not see the report until the day after it became public. Needless to say, I was very tight-jawed. I called the unit commander to apologize, flew back to Offutt, and met the team chief’s plane later that day. He had no excuse other than, “But this is what I’ve always done.” After he acknowledged that he had indeed heard and understood my new policy, I fired him on the spot, and asked the SAC personnel chief to have him either reassigned or, better still, strongly encouraged to retire.

Within days, that news was all over the command. I gave the CINC a heads-up, to which General Davis replied that hiring and firing were entirely my business, a particularly comforting affirmation as I now had a key hiring decision to make. I discussed the issue with Dorene – suddenly saddled with the awkward duty of giving the miscreant’s wife a farewell luncheon – and she was thrilled with my choice: Colonel Tom Bainbridge, the Dyess head of maintenance. That choice, however, was sure to create consternation both in the IG ranks and throughout SAC’s flying community. Tom held a navigator rating, and as such would be the first “non-pilot” to head an aircraft unit inspection team, a powerful and highly visible responsibility traditionally reserved for a former wing commander who had not been selected for further promotion. Here, however, was another message I was eager to send. As the reader now knows well, in my view, SAC’s navigators had never received due recognition for their pivotal role in the airborne nuclear deterrence mission. Indeed, I believed that the importance of the responsibilities of the pilot team in SAC had always been unduly emphasized relative to those of the navigation team, which is why I periodically wore my navigator wings when speaking to crews on alert. Not knowing the CINC’s views in this regard, despite his prior assurance about hiring and firing I alerted him to Tom’s appointment. Not a problem.

By chance, Tom had recently been reassigned to Offutt from Dyess, so he was readily available. I asked him and his dear wife, Dianne, to join Dorene and me in my office, where I broke the news. He was completely taken aback, seriously concerned as to whether the aircraft unit commanders would view him as credible. Dianne, by contrast, was thrilled, patting Tom’s arm reassuringly. I told him to trust my judgment – and hers – pack his bags and get ready for his first trip for which he had one week to prepare. I would backstop him
every step of the way on his inaugural outing, and had every confidence in his ability to handle the job. It proved to be one of the best personnel decisions I would make. Shortly thereafter, I had the opportunity to replace the heads of the missile team and the other aircraft team with experienced, loyal senior colonels. That gave me a solid trio of leaders whom I could trust completely to follow my lead, operate with minimal oversight, and play a key role in helping me implement major changes in the tone and the substance of Operational Readiness Inspections.

That change in tone was at the top of my list. Although inspections were crucial to gauging combat readiness, from the earliest days of SAC the ORI had been conducted as a merciless inquisition by the IG and his team. That was part of the legacy of General Curtis LeMay, who once said famously, “I don’t have the luxury of distinguishing between the incompetent and the unfortunate.” That axiom was ruthlessly imposed by a succession of Inspectors General, of whom the most infamous was nicknamed “Sundown Wells,” as he purportedly had fired commanders and sent them packing before nightfall on the first day of their ORIs. This anxiety-ridden environment had many drawbacks, the most egregious of which was the propensity of wing personnel to hide problems, or take extreme risks so as not to fail – risks such as pressing ahead with an ORI launch despite serious aircraft mechanical problems. I wanted to encourage units to do their best without worrying about arbitrary or inflexible rules or unwarranted second-guessing by the IG. I created a slogan, “High Standards, Fairly Applied,” imbued my teams with its precepts, and broadcast them to the field in the pages of Combat Crew. Ironically, my very first inspection brought me face-to-face with the difficulty of squaring my quest for fairness with the extant grading criteria.

The Minuteman III missile wing at Minot AFB, North Dakota, was the subject of my first ORI. Co-located with a host B-52 wing, the unit was home to three squadrons of Minuteman III ICBMs. Each of the wing’s 150 missiles was equipped with three independently-targetable nuclear warheads, and each of those warheads had many times the destructive power of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

The Minuteman III had been the heart of the U.S. ballistic missile force since 1970, when the 741st Strategic Missile Squadron assigned to the wing had achieved operational status. These 150 missiles were deployed in hardened silos under a wide swath of North Dakota, organized by groups of ten, with each group controlled by a launch team comprising two young officers housed in a survivable underground launch control center. Launch duty was rotated, requiring each of the officer teams to drive long distances from the base to their
duty locations, then make the return trip a few days later. The same held true for the small army of security, food service and maintenance troops required to keep the force on round-the-clock alert. During foul weather, which prevails often during Minot winters, this trip was often hazardous. Once arrived, the two-man launch teams faced lonely, inherently stressful duty, with long hours punctuated by unscheduled communications checks, exercises, and occasional mechanical glitches, in addition to endless study of voluminous manuals and checklists. Although I knew a great deal about the history of the ICBM business and the technical aspects of the various systems and nuclear warheads, this was my first up-close look at the daily grind of ICBM operational readiness.

This was also my first opportunity to put into effect the initial, modest changes I wanted to introduce in the tone of the inspection, beginning with my arrival. As soon as I stepped off my KC-135, I asked the wing commander to give me a tour of the base, so I could get a quick impression of the facilities, people and, most importantly, the commander himself (always a “him” in those unenlightened days). With just the two of us in his staff car for an hour or so, I was able to put him at ease while still judging the depth of his knowledge, how passers-by reacted to him – sharpness of salutes, manner of greeting – and the appearance of the base. The next stop was his office, where I had requested that the commander brief me himself (rather than a senior lieutenant colonel from the DCO staff as had been the custom) on the unit’s mission, with the other senior wing officers also present. The new routine paid off; after a couple of hours, I had a good sense of what we were likely to find as the ten-day inspection unfolded. These first-look impressions would prove nearly infallible, a skill that would serve me well over the next ten years. This time, however, I was fooled by a commander with a golden reputation who was on the inside track for promotion to brigadier general. I missed a key indicator that would prove to be his undoing. His fatal flaw was partially unmasked by a stumble in a seemingly trivial detail; it was fully revealed by the unerring instincts of my superb new team chief, Colonel Dick Sandercock.

The ORI and other evaluations had gone well in every aspect but one, and being new to the missile game, I was taken aback to learn that the result would be a failing grade for the wing, a very big deal because it would require that the unit be removed from alert status. As with the failed ORI at Griffiss, that news would reverberate to the highest levels of the Pentagon, because of its impact on SAC’s preparedness to execute the nuclear war plan and achieve its attack damage requirements. My team chief brought me the news privately and took me through a detailed explanation of the grading matrix governing evaluation of the complex communications systems that keep a missile wing connected to the
National Command Authority. At the bottom of the redundant communications totem pole was the system that would be the path of last resort under attack conditions, a long-range, low-data-rate backup system that operated in the very-low-frequency (VLF) radio band. The likelihood of operational use of this system was remote, but a very high in-service rate was nonetheless required, because if it were ever needed it would take on the utmost importance. The unit had not met that in-service rate standard, the first time such a problem had ever occurred. The grading math was cut and dried, and I had no latitude to change the outcome, even if I had been of a mind to. Indeed, when I queried Dick, the team chief, himself a former wing commander and a true professional for whom I had already gained considerable respect, he told me that this was a fair standard. More importantly, he said that in his judgment the root cause for the unacceptable failure rate lay with this wing’s commander. Dick had picked up several troubling indications that all was not well. Morale was poor from top to bottom, a reflection of the commander’s know-it-all attitude. People had given up trying to bring problems to his attention; instead, they were sweeping them under the rug, to wit, difficulties maintaining the reserve radios. Most damning, hints that the wing commander had a drinking problem had surfaced, the kiss of death in a nuclear weapons outfit. I kept that final item to myself when I called General Davis to let him know the results; my explanation of the failure satisfied him and I let events take their normal course. We stayed an extra day and cleared the unit for return to alert status, and after the prescribed 90-day window, we returned for a re-check ORI. This time the wing failed miserably, and the commander was gone within hours. No “Sundown Butler”; rather, as promised, “High Standards, Fairly Applied.”

The out-brief of the missile wing inspection introduced me to the art of briefing General Davis, not that this was an entirely new experience for me after the two accident board presentations I had endured as a highly engaged spectator. The one-hour session was led from the podium by my team chief, while I sat at the conference table in my usual seat for staff meetings. The expectation was that for each item graded “Marginal” or “Unsatisfactory,” the staff head whose office had the associated expertise would make a crisp comment or two about any relevant headquarters follow-up. When we arrived at the communications problem, dead silence followed the briefer’s explication. After a few seconds, General Davis, who in these sessions preferred to sit directly in front of the briefer, turned around in his chair and said, “I suppose this is my God damn problem to deal with,” whereupon the Director of Communications finally woke up. From that point on, I instituted a “Three Second Rule:” if no one on the SAC staff was answering after that interval, I would cover the question myself. General Davis
knew I would track the fix; thus I ensured the staff would be treated with the
dignity and respect they deserved.

In point of fact, that was the last wing to fail for the remainder of my IG
tour. By the end of the year and after several more inspections, I was com-
pletely comfortable with this aspect of my portfolio, having seen the entire
gamut of units from missile to bomber, tanker, reconnaissance, and command/
control. I had also begun to take the measure of SAC as a whole, the inspection
system, the safety record across all disciplines, the caliber of its leadership,
and the condition of its facilities. By the end of my first year, we had com-
pleted an overhaul of inspection procedures, with participation from all of my
teams and the operational units. On the safety front, I proposed to the CINC
that we begin the year with three consecutive weeks focused on all aspects of
the subject: operational, industrial and home. Experts in each unit would con-
duct a review of recent mishaps, along with corrective and preventive actions,
under the banner, “Stay Alive in ’85.” General Davis bought the program and
introduced it in the January issue of Combat Crew. I had advanced my personal
views on the subject in the October issue, in an article entitled, “Safety: A
State of Mind and A Way of Life.” I discussed very candidly my near-fatal lapse
of concentration during my T-37 check ride at Craig AFB, my enduring dismay
over the two Class A mishaps I had lived through at Mather, and my anger over
the senseless motorcycle and drowning deaths at Dyess.

After four months without a major mishap, I was starting to feel charmed.
And then a B-52 crew with a very experienced instructor pilot at the controls
made an unforgivable navigational error on a low-level bombing range, show-
ering metal and men across the top of a cold, windswept mesa in the middle
of the night. I was informed by the SAC Command Center, got my folks to-
gether, and by first light had formed an Accident Board that left immediately
for the scene. Incredibly, five of the six crew members had survived, a miracle
that also greatly facilitated piecing together the chain of causal events. The
Accident Board outbrief was crisp, leaving no doubt as to the primary factor:
aircrew error. It was a sobering reminder that despite the command’s every
effort, the safety record on my watch would be determined by leadership at
the grass-roots level. This was about daily attention to detail, in things great
and small. Harkening back to my experience at Dyess, I decided to introduce a
new inspection regime focused on three key indicators: personal appearance,
physical fitness, and disciplined behavior. I wrote an article for Combat Crew
on the subject, developed new grading criteria, trained my teams on imple-
mentation, and set about raising the standards of the command. We instituted
uniform checks, spot fitness tests, compliance checks on seat belt wear, and
took thousands of photographs of facilities and equipment. My model for this program was the work of General Creech and his historic reinvention of the Air Force’s Tactical Air Command. Therefore, I would need strong support from the top to make these measures stick, and that support would have to come from General Davis’ successor. I had no idea who that would be, but the chief of staff made sure I would be one of the first to meet him. As the new year got underway, I was called to General Brashear’s office and informed that I would run the Retirement and Change of Command ceremonies scheduled for mid-July of 1985, the end of General Davis’ four-year term of office.

This was not a trivial task. Rather, it was a mammoth undertaking requiring the orchestration of dozens of organizations and hundreds of people over months of preparation for several days of events, culminating in an elaborate ritual that would draw a large crowd of spectators and participants. All that went well, thanks to my dedicated team of professional helpers, but as the event drew closer, there was still a missing element – General Davis’ successor. The answer would shake the command to its foundations and change the course of many careers, including mine. The honor would go to a nuclear novice: General Larry Welch, career fighter pilot and, coincidentally, a gifted disciple of General Creech, who reinvented Tactical Air Command. In an ironic twist, Welch’s appointment stood a piece of Air Force history on its head: in 1961, General LeMay, as Chief of Staff, had sent a SAC numbered air force commander, General Walt Sweeney, Jr., from 8th Air Force to TAC to do for TAC what he, LeMay, had done for SAC. I had met my new boss once before. I had been a major working for Brigadier General Jasper Welch, and Larry Welch had been a colonel at TAC Headquarters running a high-profile systems integration task force for the Commander, General Bob Dixon.

Meanwhile, in the months preceding this bit of drama, Dorene and I had received a Christmas present from our son; he finished his studies at Berkeley in three and one-half years. Brett had excelled in all phases of his college experience, heading up his Air Force ROTC unit during his final semester, and graduated with honors as a business major. We were overjoyed to have him spend the spring with us at Quarters 10 while awaiting his formal graduation exercises in June. He filled this time with two rewarding ventures: an internship at Union Pacific headquarters in Omaha, where he created a software program for their financial housekeeping that created quite a buzz, and an acting stint at the Omaha Community Playhouse playing Aggie One in “The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.” Meanwhile, Lisa was thriving at Bellevue West High School, earning top grades, singing a knockout solo in the spring talent show, serving on the Aksarben Court and the Bellevue West Homecoming
Dorene also led a very active life, on the base as well as in the community. As always, she was involved with the Officers Wives Club, but more gratifying was her role as a member of the Omaha Community Playhouse Board. Going back to the days of General LeMay and his wife, Helen, the senior officers and their wives were expected to build close ties with high-profile Omaha organizations. The Community Playhouse was at the top of that list, a plum assignment as its governing board included some of the most notable civic leaders in Omaha. As a sign of their appreciation for Dorene, she was twice named volunteer of the year. She made many other contacts and friendships that brought us into the inner circle of city social life, building personal links that would pay huge dividends five years down the road. For the most part, my role at the various community functions was that of “Dorene’s husband,” since she was far better known – and far more popular.

Come June, we celebrated two graduations, Lisa’s close to home and Brett’s at Cal-Berkeley, followed by his commissioning ceremony as a second lieutenant, where the three of us were proud to do the honors. These events marked a major transition in our family life, with Brett now out into the world on his own, heading to the personnel office at Randolph AFB in Texas, and Lisa soon to take up residence in far-away Los Angeles. Enormously proud of them both, we could see their wings unfolding as they stepped over the side of the nest. For the first time in nearly twenty-two years, we would not have a child at home, a void that would have a particular impact on Dorene, who would now bear my absences quite alone. In truth, I was of little comfort even when home, with the demands of the retirement ceremonies looming closer.

To my great relief, the event came off without a glitch. General Welch and his wife, Eunice, arrived the evening before the change of command ceremony, remaining discreetly sequestered until my briefing on the agenda at the officers’ club the next morning. General Welch was his usual taciturn self, even a bit more so in light of the unfamiliar surroundings and palpable unease of a senior staff that had no idea what to expect from him. For my part, I rather liked him, his seemingly aloof demeanor notwithstanding; besides, although I was considerably junior by comparison, I knew exactly what it was like to join
Strategic Air Command with zero experience and credibility.

My instincts about General Welch were confirmed at his first staff meeting, which began as customary with a recap of notable events around the command over the preceding twenty-four hours. The opening viewgraph reported the peculiar news that, “A staff sergeant at Malmstrom AFB was arrested for conspiring to blow up a local restaurant.” Without missing a beat, General Welch said, “Food that bad, huh?” I burst out laughing, then realized everyone else in the room had stayed dead silent. General Welch and I exchanged a fleeting glance; the barely discernible up-tick at one corner of his mouth told me he recognized my reaction as spontaneous. The following months affirmed that we were on the same wave length, not only in terms of humor but, more importantly, of the leadership SAC required to become a first-rate outfit from top to bottom.

Our mutual bargain was sealed during my first ORI outbrief on his watch, its subject a KC-135 unit located in the Midwest. While the operational phase had gone well, the base facilities were deplorable, especially the airmen’s dormitories. I culled from hundreds of pictures a shot of a dilapidated chair, with one leg broken, sitting forlornly in a corner of an airman’s bedroom, and I used it to open the Facilities Inspection portion of the briefing. General Welch visibly winced, exactly the reaction I was hoping to see. After we were done, he called me and his new Vice CINC, Lieutenant General Monroe Hatch, a superb officer just arrived from the Pentagon where he had held the Air Force IG job, into his office. (Campbell had retired a week before Davis and asked me to run his ceremony as well – an off-the-wall dress rehearsal my team hardly needed.) First, he asked me if what he had seen was representative of the entire command. I told him that in many respects it was. He asked General Hatch to stay for a moment and dismissed me with the charge to call the wing commander with the offending chair and tell him that he was to fetch it from the dorm, put it in his office, and keep it there until every piece of furniture in every dormitory had been upgraded. I made sure that news was known throughout SAC by the end of the day.

The very next debriefing was far more consequential. I had just returned from Eielson AFB, Alaska, home to one of SAC’s premier reconnaissance wings. Its primary mission was dubbed “Cobra Ball,” flown from the island of Shemya in the Aleutians by a highly sophisticated RC-135 that was equipped with infrared cameras designed to track the reentry portion of Soviet ICBM test shots into the Kamchatka Peninsula. Shemya was renowned for its God-awful weather, whose effects were exacerbated by the fact that the island’s minuscule size and elongated shape dictated a runway orientation that only episodically coincided with the winds prevailing during takeoff and landing.
That anomaly had contributed to the loss of one of the two original Cobra Ball aircraft in a landing mishap in March of 1981, killing six of the twenty-four SAC and Electronic Systems Command crew members aboard.

The Cobra Ball operation was the focal point of our visit to the wing, and we were fortunate to make the landing despite horrible weather. That was no small success; an aborted approach would have meant a return to Eielson, six hours distant. The scene that greeted us was as grim and desolate as a Soviet gulag, a bleak landscape of muddy fields, gravel roads, and unappealing structures that housed the barest of essentials for this Air Force station. Despite its urgent, high-profile mission, this was a place that time and headquarters had forgotten. Neglect and complacency were everywhere apparent, but nowhere as overtly as in the cavernous Cobra Ball maintenance hangar. Strung up over the massive sliding doors at one end of the facility was a bed sheet emblazoned with a hand-drawn skull and crossbones, below which were the crudely scrawled words, “Caution, doors may fall off during high winds.” I had my team chief take several photos of this bewildering sight, along with two thousand other photos covering every aspect of life on Shemya. Dispensing with the usual agenda for the briefing to General Welch on my return, I began with the Facilities Inspection Report. My first slide was of the fateful door, and its impact was palpable. Immediately following the presentation, the CINC dispatched General Hatch to retrace my steps and confirm the report. His observations mirrored mine exactly, triggering a major overhaul of the entire operation, beginning with its chain of command.

By the spring of 1986, after nearly two years as IG, I knew my turn in the IG barrel would soon end, but I had no idea what the future might hold. The options were constrained by the fact that, although I had not really expected it to be, my name was not on the recently published two-star list. In fact, my fate, like that of many others, actually hung on a tragic accident that had occurred a year earlier, when the heir-apparent to the Air Force Chief of Staff role, the greatly respected, indeed loved, General Jerry O’Malley and his wife were killed in a landing mishap at a small civilian airport in Pennsylvania. This was a profound loss for the Air Force and the nation, and it threw a long-planned succession into disarray. For reasons to which I am not privy, the mantle was instead placed on my new boss, the Commander-in-Chief of the Strategic Air Command, General Larry Welch.

General Welch got the call informing him of this designation during a morning staff meeting; he left the room to take the call and returned without a word. When the formal announcement was later made, it was greeted with widespread astonishment, in SAC, where General Welch had served less than a year, and in the Air Force at large, where he was relatively unknown, despite
having spent a year as the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff just before coming to SAC. While happy for him, I was disappointed for the command. His impending departure had an immediate impact on me: General Hatch put me in charge of the change of command ceremony. Time was short, and I knew the drill.

I ginned up the requisite organization once more, thanking profusely the host of talented and dedicated players involved, many of whom, like me, were on their third trip through this arduous exercise. At least there was no prolonged guessing about General Welch’s replacement: the “fighter pilot as SAC commander” era was to be continued in the person of General Jack Chain. As opposed to General Welch, General Chain was well known in the top echelon of the Air Force leadership. He had enjoyed an extremely varied flying career, flying some forty-five different aircraft and serving in a variety of staff jobs, including a stint at a high-level post in the State Department. Tall, slender, silver-haired and impeccably turned out, General Jack Chain had a larger-than-life persona and would transform SAC over his five-year tenure.

My career also took a sudden turn when I received word that I would be returning to the Air Staff as assistant to the director of Air Force Operations (XOO), who happened to be none other than Major General Mike Dugan. Dorene and I were ecstatic. We were deeply fond of the Dugans and this was a super job with all the earmarks of a subsequent opportunity to move up to replace Mike, who was now on a fast track to four stars. The renter’s lease on our Virginia townhouse was just expiring, which would facilitate the move back to the D.C. area. All that remained was to manage the change of command ceremony and turn my office over to my successor.

Writing this chapter reminded me that my term as the SAC IG was extraordinarily fortuitous. I learned its missions and facilities inside out and was in position to serve the extraordinary officer whom fate had thrust so suddenly into the role of Air Force Chief of Staff. This initial Offutt tour was equally satisfying from a family standpoint, providing Lisa a safe haven for her all-important senior year in high school, a perfect interim shelter for Brett as he awaited commissioning in the Air Force, and a stable life for Dorene in her adopted hometown. She has often said that she must have lived in Omaha in another life, and it brought me great joy to see her so happy and fulfilled.
Chapter 21

Air Staff Director (1986 – 1987)

The return to familiar environs in Virginia made the transition to a second Pentagon tour comfortable. We spruced up the River Farms townhouse, reconnected with friends, and Dorene took a position with an employment company located nearby. Working outside the home would ease the loneliness sure to set in following Lisa’s departure for her freshman year at UCLA.

This domestic sense of well-being was echoed in my work, riding shotgun for Mike Dugan in his role as the XOO. Harley Hughes, now wearing three stars, was the XO and Larry Welch was in the Air Force front office; my chain of command comprised three of the best mentors anyone could ask for. Moreover, I knew all of the key Air Staff players and had no trouble catching up with the issues I had left five years earlier. My only direction from Mike was to keep his inbox empty so he could focus on the larger issues of the day. That I was happy to do, since I was likely on track to replace him when the timing was right and therefore needed to learn in depth the headquarters’ role in managing the operations world.

Our shop was a hands-on business that supported the day-to-day life of the field units. We were housed in the netherworld of the Pentagon, occupying a large swath of the first underground floor, an unmapped rabbit warren of disjointed corridors and cubicles where the common point of reference for directions was a centrally located water fountain, whose purple ceramic pedestal made it unique in the building. The directorate comprised several functionally organized divisions, each headed by a full colonel. Mike and I occupied offices fronting on a common reception area that was home to our respective secretaries and executive officers. My secretary, Mardy, was terrific, as was the exec I inherited, Major Don Pettit. He had risen from the enlisted ranks and was thus more mature than his contemporaries; more than that, he was wise far beyond his years. He would become indispensable, as a multi-talented assistant and preferred companion. I grew to trust and rely on his judgment and advice on a par with people far superior in rank. We developed a bond
that would transcend our official relationship and lead to one of the most pro-
ductive associations of my entire career. I had seen a number of such special
bonds, beginning in my days with George Brown, where I had been witness to
his rich friendship with a senior colonel who had served with him on many oc-
casions. Having myself found such a unique officer was a blessing to me, one
that has paid innumerable dividends over the ensuing years.

I took Mike at his word and jumped into the job with both feet, running
with anything I felt big enough to carry. We were completely at ease with
each other, and I relished the opportunity to work for and with him. My high
opinion of his abilities and professionalism was reaffirmed as I observed his
powerful leadership skills, vision, and graceful maneuvering in bureaucratic
traffic. My role was fulfilling and educational, to include a novel opportunity
that arose from an invitation to the new Chief of Staff, General Larry Welch,
from his counterpart in Yugoslavia to review that benighted nation’s air arm.
The Chief wanted me to accompany him, which I was more than happy to do,
intrigued by the chance to see what had become of Marshal Tito’s handiwork
after his passing.

The travel party included Eunice Welch, a protocol specialist, and me. We
launched out of Andrews AFB and flew direct to Belgrade, where by now win-
ter was settling in with a vengeance. The ubiquitous coal-fired furnaces and
fireplaces that were the primary sources of heat and power filled the damp
air with a noxious dust that obscured visibility, violated breathing passages
and colored the landscape a uniformly depressing shade of gray. The streets
were crowded with huddled, freezing people in drab dress whose vacant eyes
scoured mostly empty shops in search of mostly unpalatable food. Our ac-
ccommodations were by comparison luxurious, a legacy of Tito’s penchant for
comfortable surroundings. We were treated to a state dinner that was well
prepared and presented. The evening was otherwise stiff and awkward, a
product of our host’s dour personality and lack of experience in dealing with
distinguished visitors from outside his spare little communist world.

The following day we were off in a Yugoslav version of the T-39 for a three-
stop tour covering an airbase, a regional headquarters, and an overnight stay
in the historic city of Dubrovnik, home to Tito’s version of Camp David. A re-
nowned hunter, he had built a sumptuous lodge nestled in a tree line over-
looking the beautiful waters of the Adriatic. The airfield and headquarters
were entirely forgettable, testimony to their spiritless residents and years of
neglect. Far more memorable was the locals’ overt antipathy for their coun-
trymen from Belgrade. The hatred seething in their eyes and voices was chill-
ing, an ominous harbinger of the unspeakable atrocities that came when this
pseudo-state descended into ethnic Hell.

The dinner in Dubrovnik proved engaging, as voluminous quantities of red wine loosened tongues and lifted humors. We were arrayed around a large banquet table in an ancient castle that commanded a breathtaking view of the harbor below. Course followed course, the night grew long and the conversation increasingly blue. At one point, the talk turned to American X-rated movies, which obviously had a devoted following among our tablemates. While Eunice and I were visibly nonplussed, General Welch carried on with his usual aplomb, at one point making a wry interjection that left the interpreter speechless. After a few seconds, he gave it his best shot and the table-pounding laughter told me he got Welch’s humor just right.

The next day we made another pro-forma stop and then returned to Belgrade for a quiet night before the next day’s departure. We awoke to a world completely enveloped in fog, a thick pea-soup vapor that would have put San Francisco to shame. Things did not look promising, but Welch insisted that we set off for the airport. Our host demurred, saying that take-off visibility was still zero and not forecast to improve – not today and maybe not for a week. Welch simply picked up his bags and said we were going to keep moving forward and see what happened. We crept several miles to the field, filed a flight plan, said a tentative farewell, boarded our plane, cranked the four engines, taxied to the runway and, to the bewilderment of the assemblage back in the terminal, took off. Welch was at the controls, and I sat in the jump seat, eyes glued to the centerline, of which precisely one striped marker was visible ahead of the nose. The Chief made a textbook departure, the flying gods were kind, and we were headed home. It was great to be the king.

The New Year dawned with news that Mike was moving upstairs as assistant XO, that is, Harley’s back-up, and that I would replace him as the director of operations. That put a second star on my shoulders, and shortly thereafter Mike was advanced to three stars, as the DCS for Programs and Resources – a heavy-duty responsibility that signaled he was a strong contender for the four-star ranks. Thanks to his mentoring, I was well prepared to move into his role and had mapped out the first several months of my tenure. For openers, I wanted to check out in as many front-line aircraft as possible, starting with a trip to Luke AFB, Arizona, home to the F-15 “Eagle” training program.

That proved an exhilarating rejuvenation of my dormant fighter skills. The F-15 was the Maserati of the Air Force’s updated stable of high-performance machines, and the complexity of its weapons control systems was mindboggling. After three days in the simulator learning to “play the piccolo,” a euphemism for manipulating the dozens of buttons on the stick and throttles that
allowed fingertip control of the navigation, fire control, communications and instrument displays, I was cleared for flight with an instructor pilot.

When I arrived at the aircraft, I noted my name neatly painted on the side, just below the canopy, giving me far more publicity than I was due. My instructor, a young major who looked like he could bench-press the airplane, got me strapped in, talked me through the engine start, and then it was all mine. The takeoff was literally breathtaking. After an incredibly short roll, I lifted the nose, raised the gear and pointed the machine straight up. A few seconds later, I pulled the nose down, rolled right side up, level at ten thousand feet, still over the runway, my love affair with the F-4 now a distant memory.

We transitioned to the maneuver area and began to put the bird through its paces. The IP took charge at that point because he wanted to test my tolerance to “G” forces, given my time away from combat maneuvering. It was humbling – I could barely keep my head in the game past four “Gs,” a long way from the seven typical of modern-day air-to-air engagements. I spent thirty minutes executing a series of turns, loops and rolls and then headed back to the field for landing practice. The next day I was more acclimated, getting to seven “Gs” before my vision started to fade. I managed to keep my game face on, but in my gut I knew that this was a young person’s game – all the while I was battling to stay conscious, my IP was chatting away without the slightest discomfort, a telling insight into the physical and mental conditioning required to fly this new line of war machines. That became even more apparent when we flew our first mission against another F-15 in a head-to-head fight. I took up a position several thousand feet below my opponent, who was approaching from the front at a closing speed of two thousand miles an hour. As he neared a point directly overhead, I pulled back hard on the stick and initiated a climb designed to put us directly behind him in position for a simulated missile attack. By sheer luck, I timed the maneuver properly. While that was modestly impressive for a novice, I was under no illusion about being able to pull it off in the cauldron of combat.

I went through a similar experience with the F-16, an equally hot fighter but with some notable differences, the most challenging for me being the fly-by-wire controls. That meant the traditional control stick had been reduced to a simple handle mounted on the right side of the cockpit. It required only the slightest pressure to maneuver the airplane, and that took some getting used to, but again, by the third mission I was fairly adept at it.

After two months on the job, I felt as if I had died and gone to pilot’s heaven. I had traveled to a number of bases to observe missions with which I had little or no familiarity, including the stealth birds and the covert operations
of the Special Forces, with their night vision equipment and Ninja-like combat skills. My life was too good to be true and too good to last. In early May, Harley Hughes called me up to his office to tell me I was moving to the Joint Staff to be the deputy director of strategic plans and policy, or J-5 in the parlance of the joint arena. I was momentarily taken aback, not sure what to make of this abrupt transition. Traditionally, the joint world was a pasture for officers who had topped out in their careers but had a few years left before retirement eligibility. Anticipating my concern, Harley filled me in on the aforementioned piece of legislation that had recently passed the Congress, the Goldwater-Nichols Act, named for Senator Barry M. Goldwater (R-Arizona) and Representative William F. Nichols (D-Alabama). These two notable legislators, deeply versed in national defense matters, had decided to take on – as in sledgehammer – the military services’ disdain for joint operations. Among a host of provisions, one got undivided attention – from now on, no officer would be considered for promotion to flag officer (general or admiral) unless he or she had served in a qualifying joint assignment. This signaled a sea change in the way the services would manage tours in the joint arena and, even though I was already a general officer, I was going to be in the forefront of that change. There was a strong likelihood that future nominations for three- and four-star positions would also be contingent on the same criterion, so I was heartened to get the joint seal of approval now. I was about to say goodbye to the purple water fountain and hello to the world of purple thinking.
I was acquainted with some aspects of the Joint Staff arena from my earlier tour as an Air Staff action officer dealing with arms control issues, most notably the “Flimsy-Buff-Green-Red Stripe” process for managing interservice paperwork. However, I knew nothing of the culture or day-to-day workings of the eight directorates comprising the Joint Staff, that is, the staff of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or CJCS. The man in that position in mid-1987 was Admiral William J. Crowe, a brilliant officer who had made his way to the top despite the determined effort of many of his Navy seniors to end his career prematurely. I had never laid eyes on him, nor did I anticipate having any significant interaction with him, since I was three steps down the organizational ladder in my role as the deputy director of J-5, working for Army Lieutenant General Dale Vesser.

The J-5 offices are located on the second floor on the outer or E-Ring of the Pentagon, fronting the Potomac River. The director and I were accorded a large suite of rooms that afforded each of us a private chamber and space for our respective executive officers and secretaries. Our slice of the Joint Staff comprised three deputy directorates, whose combined charters spanned strategic planning, worldwide U.S. defense organization, security policy, regional alliances, and a half-dozen arms-control arenas. Each dealt with a broad agenda of issues of vital importance to national security, issues that reached into the very heart of service roles, missions, organization, and equipment. This was a particularly sensitive time in the joint arena, because the Goldwater-Nichols Act had greatly increased the authority of the CJCS, elevating him from first among equals to Principal Military Advisor to the Secretary of Defense and to the President. Whereas in the past the Chairman’s advice had been diluted by interjections of the service chiefs, he was now empowered to provide opinions upward despite any pushback from them. Enacted in the middle of his term,
the historic act placed Crowe in the awkward position of inaugurating a new era, making the wrenching turn from strict consensus-building to exercising professional independence, all the while prepared to stare down hostility from any or all of the service chiefs.

No one was better suited to this task than Admiral Bill Crowe. A down-home Oklahoman of towering intellect and marvelous wit, he was also very independent-minded. Early in his career, he had committed the unthinkable sin of rejecting Admiral Hyman Rickover’s invitation to join the nuclear-powered submarine community, diving instead into graduate work at Princeton, where he earned a Ph.D. in Politics. Thereafter, he was a marked man, time after time escaping career-ending assignments through sheer competence and unyielding determination to succeed despite all odds. Here was a man I could relate to.

Admiral Crowe would need all of his brain power and people skills to cope with the issues crowding his inbox, the most vexing of which were under the purview of the J-5. Prominent among these were strategic nuclear arms control and its evil twin, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a multidimensional ballistic missile defense program better known as “Star Wars.” A brain child of Dr. Edward Teller, godfather of the thermonuclear bomb and the darling of President Ronald Reagan, Star Wars had already been responsible for the expenditure of billions of dollars and for greatly complicating arms-reduction negotiations with the Soviets. The J-5 was responsible for crafting arms-control positions for the Chairman to present to the service chiefs and to argue for the JCS in the intergovernmental working groups, where consensus was sought among the many agencies with skin in the game. Within J-5, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiations, and many others, were the purview of Rear Admiral Tom Fox, who headed the J-5’s international negotiations (IN) Deputy Directorate. Having earned Crowe’s complete trust, Tom ruled his turf with an iron hand and operated with virtual autonomy. Given the Air Force’s interest in the outcomes of these debates, not to mention my own background in these issues, I was determined to gain a toehold in shaping Tom’s agenda, which meant I would first have to win his confidence.

The J-5’s other two deputy directorates, for political-military affairs (PMA) and for strategy and policy (SP), were home to issues that would occasionally blow up into bureaucratic crises, but by and large their work proceeded quietly. PMA’s branches were organized geographically, the largest by far covering Europe, home to NATO and its multiplicity of security contracts. I was quite surprised as I became educated on the wide range of formal agreements and informal arrangements the United States military managed around the world.
This essential security fabric depended largely on personal contacts throughout the extensive defense attaché network. These unsung heroes serving in U.S. embassies throughout the world, typically colonels or Navy captains supported by a team of lesser-ranking assistant military attachés (think Ted Warner in Moscow), comprised a priceless source of insight, intelligence, and plain common sense about the internal workings of the defense establishments in almost every country on the planet. Washington, D.C., was home to their foreign counterparts, all of whom labored to gather information about our military, but many of whom also acted as trusted intermediaries, building relationships between their own nations and the U.S. military. J-5 was an important touchstone for this huge family of professionals, foreign and domestic, and PMA did the bulk of the J-5’s “touching.” PMA was run by an Army one-star, rigid as a post, with whom I would almost immediately lock horns.

Finally, the J-5’s deputy director for strategy and policy (SP) was responsible for the most important processes in the joint arena. Foremost among these was the cycle that produced the National Military Strategy (NMS), a capstone document mandated by the Congress that emerged from complex intercourse among hundreds of intelligence analysts, force specialists, and strategic thinkers in the military services, the military intelligence community, and the Joint Staff. The NMS was central to DoD because it articulated the rationale for the missions and capabilities of U.S. military forces, forces arrayed in ten functionally and geographically organized “combatant commands” whose collective responsibilities spanned the globe. Their rather general designations – Pacific Command, Atlantic Command, European Command, Space Command, and so on – do not do justice to the stature and sway of their four-star commanders. Setting the geographical and functional boundaries of those commanders’ fiefdoms, allocating forces to them, and approving the war plans they developed comprised the third rail of jointness. The Goldwater-Nichols Act had exacerbated this tension by enhancing the prerogatives not only of the Chairman, but also of these field commanders, putting them on a par with the service chiefs and thereby expanding their sway in resource allocation. The annual food fight for resources – in which the services had up to then always prevailed over the operational commanders – was transformed overnight into a battle royal on a more level playing field, and I was about to be named one of the referees. However, even though the J-5 drafted the rule book, handled the initial skirmishes, and served as the Chairman’s body armor, the bloodiest confrontations were Admiral Crowe’s to win or lose. While I had not expected to be drawn into these internecine wars as the deputy director, I was almost immediately thrust into the middle of an unanticipated blowup over
the manning and organization of the combatant commands.

The Army one-star who headed SP was a reserved man of intellectual bent who presided benevolently over a shop rich in talent. I was amused during my first walk-through of his area to hear an irate action officer slam down his phone and exclaim, “God damn the Navy!” When I poked my head through his doorway, I was delighted to see none other than a Navy lieutenant commander, leading me to conclude that maybe jointness had begun to take hold. Messieurs Goldwater and Nichols would have been proud.

While I did not have much business with the other seven directors of the Joint Staff, I spent some time learning their organizations and responsibilities, which ranged from the mundane stuff of administration and personnel to the relentless demands on the J-3, the operations directorate, that tracked the real-time activities of our far-flung U.S. forces around the clock.

This J-1 through J-8 constellation was managed for the Chairman by the Director of the Joint Staff, or “DJS,” a three-star position invariably filled by an officer on track for promotion to a fourth star who possessed not only a brilliant record, but also uncommon bureaucratic skills. When I arrived on the scene, the DJS was Army Lieutenant General Bob RisCassi, who reminded me ever so much of Army Lieutenant Colonel Clint Black from my Armed Forces Staff College days. Like Black, General RisCassi was an encyclopedia of joint knowledge. He radiated a quiet confidence, was refreshingly unassuming, and seemed indefatigable. I liked him from the moment we met during a welcome-aboard session in his office. I would rely on him often in the year to come.

As expected, I had barely settled into my deputy director role when word came that the director was retiring: General Vesser was to be relieved by Vice Admiral Jack Baldwin. I was happy to fill the role of host of a farewell party to send General Vesser off – although as things turned out our collaboration, brief as it was – and rather stiff – would be renewed on a much more intense note. Incoming Admiral Baldwin and his wife, Leslie, provided a pleasant change of pace. An easygoing Marylander with a home on the Atlantic shore, Admiral Baldwin had no further career aspirations and was comfortable with Admiral Crowe and, happily, with me. We hit it off immediately, as reflected in his guidance, which echoed that of Mike Dugan: get involved with every major issue, keep me informed, take as much of the work load as you can handle, and take care of the tedium of staff management. I got the sense that Admiral Baldwin knew I was in line to replace him downstream and, as with General Dugan, wanted to make sure I was prepared fully to step into the his shoes. I was greatly indebted to him for this consideration. His trust and confidence gave me the latitude to run with consequential issues.
The first of those issues arrived in the form of a summons from General RisCassi, who called me to his office in mid-September and dropped in my lap a ticking time bomb – the “Vander Schaaf Report.” Derek Vander Schaaf was the DoD Inspector General, a civilian position that commanded broad powers to investigate fraud, waste and abuse throughout the far-flung reaches of the nation’s defense establishment, reporting both to the Secretary of Defense and to the Congress. Derek and Admiral Crowe had just returned from a whirlwind tour of the ten combatant commands, during which they had been underwhelmed by the activity level of the variety of staffs they had observed. That had prompted Derek to crank out a 330-page report recommending draconian cuts, upwards of thirty percent, in these support elements. A firestorm ensued, and Admiral Crowe found himself inundated with fiery protests from the four-star combatant commanders, who were understandably put-off by this attack on their authority and their headquarters’ manning. My task from General RisCassi was to develop a response to the report, from the Chairman to the Secretary of Defense. I tell the story of this experience for two reasons. First, I was forced to learn the organization and missions of the ten combatant commands to a great level of detail, knowledge that would serve me extremely well when I moved to the J-5 Director position a year later. Second, it would teach me a lesson about testifying before a Congressional committee that I would never forget and frequently employ in the years to come.

I spent a week absorbing the massive document, line-by-line, word-by-word along with becoming expert in the ten sprawling empires under Derek’s gun. That would, in turn, require three months to build a worldwide network of action officers who could feed me and my staff the mountains of material we would need, then help us draft the reply and get their four-star bosses to sign off on the product. I barricaded myself in my office and, with selected members of my staff, began the grinding task of mastering a voluminous body of knowledge. My strategy was to answer the report line-by-line, compiling a rebuttal of precisely the same 330-page length that spoke to every single inference and allegation. Admiral Baldwin watched all this with great amusement, running interference from time to time, but otherwise staying out of my way. When I delivered our opus to General RisCassi, he read it cover-to-cover and took it to the Chairman, who realized he was in a bind. Having had a hand in creating this problem, he now had to figure out how to unwind it gracefully in the face of Derek Vander Schaaf’s handiwork – now largely discredited by the draft rebuttal report.

Since the final resolution would lie with the Secretary of Defense, Frank Carlucci, the next step was obvious: Secretary Carlucci had to be briefed on the
proposed reply. I spent the following week summarizing the report in the form of a 100-viewgraph briefing that would require 90 minutes to present. When I walked General RisCassi through it, he agreed that the subject warranted such a lengthy brief but warned me that Secretary Carlucci had a notoriously short attention span; ten minutes was the published norm for what he would tolerate. I decided to trust my judgment and keep every slide. Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. The fact was that I would be speaking for ten four-stars and, to my way of thinking, the Secretary owed them the courtesy of hearing me, as their intermediary, out. That decision was guaranteed to draw a crowd – and did it ever.

The briefing was scheduled for 2:00 p.m., the worst possible time for a presentation of this length and complexity. I had a light lunch and then spent an hour on the couch in my office composing myself for what lay ahead. When I arrived at the Secretary of Defense’s conference room, it was packed, and the air was electric with anticipation. I felt for all the world like a Christian entering the Coliseum, even more so when I heard the gasps as I placed my mountain of viewgraphs beside the projector. At that point, the Secretary and the Chairman steamed into the room and took their places, side by side, at the head of the table. Game on.

The Chairman gave a brief introduction – everyone present knew the issue and the stakes. As Admiral Crowe spoke, Secretary Carlucci was eyeing my stack of slides and was on me the instant Admiral Crowe concluded. “General Butler,” said the Secretary, “how long do you plan to brief?” “Ninety minutes,” I replied without hesitation. He sputtered and barked that he had never in his life sat through a presentation longer than twenty minutes. “I am aware of that,” I rejoined, “so I have a proposition for you.” The room was now dead quiet. “What would that be, General?” he queried. “Well, sir, I will begin, and I invite you to terminate the briefing at any point you deem that it is no longer productive to listen.” Crowe shot me a glance that said, “You are on your own, my friend,” a risk I was obviously willing to take. Secretary Carlucci sat back in his chair and cryptically grumbled, “Agreed. Begin.”

I opened with a series of quotes from the ten combatant commanders, who had minced no words in making clear their disdain for the Inspector General’s report and their anger regarding the impact his proposed personnel cuts would have on their ability to fulfill their missions. It was powerful stuff, and by the tenth slide I had the Secretary’s undivided attention. He did not thereafter look at the clock, even when I turned off the projector 90 slides later. At that juncture, he turned to Admiral Crowe and said, “Hell, Bill, what do we do now?” The Chairman said he would chew on it for a bit and get back
to him, which I knew was code for, ”Let’s sit on this and pretend it never hap-
pened.” With that, the meeting broke up, Admiral Crowe gave me a knowing
nod, and I left the room happy this was over.

Which it was not; we had all underestimated the DoD IG. Within days,
Secretary Carlucci’s office was informed that a special subcommittee of the
House Armed Services Committee (HASC) had been formed to hear the find-
ings of the IG’s report, and Major General Butler was to make the presenta-
tion. I got a call from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and
Reserve Affairs, who told me that the two of us would appear before the sub-
committee two days hence. A seasoned veteran in dealing with the Hill, he
advised me to keep my opening statement short, let him handle the ques-
tions, and politely take whatever verbal abuse they might heap upon us – all
sound advice that I chose to completely ignore. Fresh from my star turn with
the Secretary, I was eager to take on the subcommittee, spinning an opening
statement that would require at least a half-hour to get through. That was
Very Big Mistake Number One. Even Bigger Mistake Number Two was failing
to do my homework as to what had prompted the HASC’s summons. After
all, the Vander Schaaf Report was essentially an internal document critiquing
headquarters manning, so what or who had piqued their potentially-hostile
interest? The answer must have been so obvious to my OSD hand-holder that
he did not think it necessary to tell me what I should have known in the first
place. Derek’s charter allowed him to share the report with Congress, and,
moreover, he had for many years prior to joining the Secretary of Defense’s
staff been an able and well-regarded member of the House Armed Services
Committee staff.

The HASC’s very large hearing room was packed. The sub-committee’s
members peered down from banks of desks that rose in three tiers facing the
witness table where my OSD colleague and I sat looking up; behind us, mor-
bidly curious members of the press and the public filled several rows of specta-
tors’ seats. A court recorder sat just to the left of the witness table, earphones
and speaking device at the ready. The sub-committee chairman called the
hearing to order, introduced the subject, and called on the Assistant Secretary,
who made brief comments about how delighted we were to be there and how
eager we were to respond to the sub-committee’s questions about the re-
port. He then passed me the microphone, which I seized with a vengeance.
Had I a clue about the committee’s agenda, I might have noticed how rest-
less the members were becoming as I passed the five-minute mark. At ten
minutes, the chairman asked if I could begin to wrap up my remarks, to which
I earnestly replied that I was not even halfway done. With that, he assured
me that my full statement would be entered into the record, then invited the committee members, who were licking their rhetorical chops, to pose their questions. Not surprisingly, every single query was directed to me. Still living in another dimension, and naïvely distressed that my opening statement had been cut short, I was, by God, determined to make the unread points in reply to whatever questions might be asked. That folly was guaranteed to further aggravate my interlocutors, and it did: their comments made clear they were sympathetic to Mr. Vander Schaaf’s report, which fact served only to egg me on. The exchanges grew increasingly tense, finally prompting the chairman to blurt out, “My gracious, general, you make Derek Vander Schaaf sound like he is the Ayatollah Khomeini.” Red Alert.

That verbal slap up the side of my head brought me to my senses. I was digging a deeper hole by the second; it was time to stop shoveling and start groveling. I asked the chairman if we could go off the record for one minute, an almost unheard-of request from a witness. Taken aback, he agreed, asking the recorder to turn off her machine. “Mister Chairman, distinguished members, I first want to set the record straight. I have the highest regard for Mr. Vander Schaaf; this is not about him, but about his report, which I have spent several months studying in the greatest detail. What you have seen and heard from me today is a reflection of the seriousness I attach to it and the responsibility I feel to convey accurately the concerns of the ten senior combatant commanders who have entrusted me to speak for them. The long and short of it is that, to a man, they believe the report threatens their ability to accomplish their assigned missions. That said, I apologize to the committee for my obvious lack of experience as a witness – this is my first testimony before the Congress, and I have made a hash of it. Assuring you that I have dismounted my high-horse, I am ready to go back on the record and try again, a chastened and wiser man.”

The tone of the hearing changed instantly. The members showed mercy and understanding, permitting a useful dialogue and leaving them satisfied that Derek’s report had received a fair hearing within the Department of Defense. After closing the session, and the matter, the chairman took me aside and said how much he appreciated my candor and willingness to acknowledge an amateurish mistake. I thanked him for his forbearance and assured him that this was a lesson I would take with me for the rest of my career. However painful the experience, from that day forth, during the many hours I would spend testifying through the years to come, I became a much more capable, eventually expert, witness.

Having failed at self-immolation, I spent the bulk of my remaining time as the deputy J-5 on two other tasks. The first of those was a series of studies
initiated by the Vice Chairman of the JCS, Air Force General Bob Herres, aimed at unraveling the secrets of the Single Integrated Operations Plan, or SIOP (pronounced sigh-op), the nation’s strategic nuclear war plan, a product drafted by the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff (JSTPS), a Joint Staff organization located at SAC Headquarters. My other main task was a grueling one-year term as head of a delegation engaged with counterparts from the Soviet Union in negotiating what became known as the Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities. These two endeavors greatly expanded my knowledge of four processes that would consume my professional life for the balance of my military career: intelligence collection, analysis and reporting; nuclear target planning; weapons acquisition; and the development of U.S. national security policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and, subsequently, the Russian Federation.

The importance of the SIOP studies noted above lay in the enormous fiscal and bureaucratic consequences of nuclear target planning – a process that began with tens of thousands of prospective targets that in my day were then reduced through complex winnowing to some 12,000 selected for attack by U.S. strategic forces. These choices then became requirements that drove the massive efforts and staggering costs essential to developing and acquiring successive generations of weapons, delivery systems, surveillance assets, and the command and control communication nets supporting the Air Force’s Strategic Air Command and the Navy’s submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) community. This process was tightly held by both military services. Astonishingly, as will be described in the following chapter, neither the Chairman of the JCS nor the Secretary of Defense were permitted to observe this process closely. Thus, all responsible officials outside the JSTPS were denied the insights essential to exercise properly their role in reviewing the resulting SIOP, and therefore to understand fully the rationale for the array of new strategic systems being considered for development and deployment in DoD’s annual budgets. This egregious state of affairs had been created deliberately – and for decades perpetuated – by the keepers of the keys to the nuclear kingdom. General Herres, as Vice Chairman of the JCS, a post recently created by the Goldwater-Nichols Act, had a fresh legal mandate to oversee the complete budget-creation system from the JCS perspective, and he was determined to bring the nuclear requirements process out of the shadows into the light of critical, independent scrutiny.

To that end, he set in motion a dozen studies aimed at illuminating all aspects of the targeting cycle: intelligence collection, analysis, and reporting; strategy and policy development; target nomination and selection; the damage criteria objectives set for various classes of targets; the associated links to
nuclear warhead and strategic delivery system requirements; surveillance and warning assumptions and demands; and the day-to-day posture of the U.S. strategic nuclear forces. Admiral Baldwin asked me to oversee J-5 participation in these studies; indeed, our directorate had the Joint Staff’s lead responsibility on most of them. This was a daunting management task, made more difficult by the tight-lipped determination of the JSTPS to reveal as little as possible to the action officers doing the legwork. This stonewalling significantly slowed the progress of the studies, which dragged on for well over a year. General Herres prodded me relentlessly to speed the process, but that was well beyond my control. Finally, in September of 1989 – I had by then been moved up to be the three-star director of the J-5 – help arrived in the person of the new Director of the Joint Staff, Lieutenant General Mike Carns, an extremely bright and able ’59 Academy graduate who was as well the soul of integrity.

He and I soon built a solid relationship, facilitated by our 4:30 a.m. daily carpool together from Bolling, eight miles and two bridges east of the Pentagon, where we lived two houses apart. The thirty-minute drive to the Pentagon allowed us to compare notes on J-5 business, most notably the Herres studies. Mike was as incensed as I was by JSTPS’s stonewalling, so we joined forces and flew to Offutt for an up-close and personal meeting with the builders of the SIOP. It was a jaw-dropping session, during which we finally pried loose the Holy Grail of nuclear targeting, namely, The Blue Book. Unknown outside JSTPS and wholly unauthorized, this locally-created document was of earth-shaking import, as it unilaterally revised and extended national nuclear targeting policy after it had been reviewed by the Secretary of Defense and approved by the President.

Mike and I could hardly believe what we were seeing. The target selection and damage criteria guidance in The Blue Book went far beyond what policy-makers in Washington had intended or imagined. Its specifications drove the elaboration of a SIOP of mind-boggling complexity, requiring entire floors of main-frame computers and eighteen months to produce. More to the point of General Herres’ budgetary concerns, these home-grown requirements drove the demand for nuclear warheads and strategic delivery systems – bombers, land- and sea-based strategic missiles – to other-worldly levels. By the end of the visit, I was infuriated with this surreptitious process, its self-serving secrecy, and the endless appetite for extremely expensive systems it engendered. For me, the ramifications were astounding not just in dollars but in the cycle of mutual suspicion and worst-case planning that over decades had helped fuel the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union and had led to the creation of gigantic stockpiles of nuclear weapons. The JSTPS
and the processes it implemented were now in my crosshairs.

I shared my dismay with only one other person besides Mike Carns: Frank Miller, who played the leading role in OSD in attacking this wholly-irresponsible breakdown in the formulation of nuclear weapons employment policy. Frank was a career civil servant on the Policy staff of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He was charged with preparing the Secretary for his responsibility to detail, and thence promulgate to the Joint Staff, Presidential direction regarding the prospective use of nuclear weapons. The Secretary’s guidance was contained in a document entitled “Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy,” better known as NUWEP. I cannot overstate the importance of this document or the frustration Frank had long harbored over the official stiff-arming he had for years encountered in his efforts to ensure continuity between the guidance his office developed and the SIOP built by the JSTPS. Mike Carns and I had met Frank while pursuing our tasks for General Herres, and we had come to respect Frank’s professionalism. He had for four years been modifying NUWEP in an effort to rein in many of the dysfunctional targeting practices of the JSTPS; however, he still lacked access to the weapon-by-weapon targeting information that he needed to ensure full compliance with the intent of NUWEP. And then serendipity walked through the door – in March of 1989, Secretary Carlucci was replaced by Dick Cheney, a tough, wily Washington veteran who would not tolerate being kept in the dark or being end-run by the service chiefs or the CJCS. Frank’s prior association with Cheney created an avenue to bring the Secretary’s authority to the SIOP battle.

When the CINCSAC, General Jack Chain, in his hat as Director of the JSTPS, brought his annual SIOP briefing to the Pentagon, Frank briefed his boss in advance on what he would see, and, more importantly, on what he would not see, i.e., the guidance set forth in the clandestine Blue Book. The Secretary listened intently to the purposefully sketchy details of the SIOP attack, then asked if anyone had any questions. As usual, no one did, and Cheney departed without comment. But Cheney had noted, among other things, the large number of bridges targeted in the Soviet Union: he would learn later that the selection criteria for bridges was simply the length of their spans, rather than their relative importance in the transportation network. Using similar elementary criteria over the whole infrastructure of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies produced absurdly large numbers of targets to be struck, most of little consequence. Point made, hook set. So Frank finally got the access required for a wholesale revisit of the targeting process, and, two years hence, I would be in a position to take his work further, removing many more targets from the SIOP and thereby facilitating the termination of unneeded weapons programs.
commanding tens of billions of dollars. Frank’s work was so important that I have enlisted his aid in elaborating in the following chapter a detailed history of how the state of affairs described above came to be, and his heroic efforts in bringing the JSTPS to heel.

While the longer-term payoff I would join Frank in wresting from the nuclear targeting process would take time to materialize, the dividends from my third and most demanding enterprise as the deputy J-5 were more immediate. This would be my inaugural chance to manage a task of historic import, one that arose from an unprecedented event.

Such was the decades-long alienation of the principal Cold War antagonists that their most-senior military officers had never met for an extended exchange in either of their respective homelands. That woeful record was ended by Secretary Carlucci. He set the stage in Berne, Switzerland, in March of 1988, in an encounter with Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Dimitri Yazov, where he forcefully expressed his concern regarding a series of dangerous encounters between Soviet and American military forces. These included hostile reactions to U.S. air and ground border patrols, attempts to draw U.S. aircraft off course by broadcasting phony navigation signals, aiming lasers at soldiers and pilots, and naval “shouldering,” that is, Soviet ships deliberately bumping U.S. ships plowing the waters of the Black Sea in accord with international law. Fearing that any of these episodes could swiftly mushroom into a much larger conflict, the Secretary proposed, and Minister Yazov agreed, that Admiral Crowe and his Soviet counterpart, the Chief of the Soviet General Staff, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, would meet at the Pentagon in early July to discuss in depth these dangerous incidents and find measures to stop them.

Admiral Crowe went a step further, inviting Marshal Akhromeyev to set aside time for a tour of selected U.S. military facilities and a visit to the admiral’s home state, Oklahoma. The marshal agreed, bringing with him a number of his senior officers. During the visit I afforded a personal view of the developing chemistry between these two extraordinary men, as well as the deep impression made on Marshal Akhromeyev by the quality of our installations and poise of our troops. The Soviets were astonished by the scope of responsibility assigned to our non-commissioned officers, the vital roles they play, the number of women and minorities serving at all levels, and the sophistication of our equipment and training. As I would soon see firsthand, there were stark differences with the Red Army.

By the end of the visit, Admiral Crowe and Marshal Akhromeyev had established a close rapport and a trust that transcended their ideological differences. They agreed that it was imperative to put a stop to the type of incidents
that Secretary Carlucci and Minister Yazov had discussed in Berne and that the way forward would be to initiate negotiations between the U.S. and Soviet militaries to produce what came to be known as the Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities. I got that news on a Friday afternoon shortly after the visit had ended. Admiral Crowe rang my intercom and asked me to come to his office, where he told me about the initiative and informed me that I would be in charge of the American negotiating team. His guidance was crisp and motivating: “Lee,” he said, “this is an historic opportunity – make it worthwhile.”

I was at once flattered and floored. While I was no stranger to the results of prior U.S.-Soviet arms-control negotiations, my only previous involvement had been as a low-level staff officer parsing the issues and drafting Air Force positions for discussions among the JCS. I had never sat at the negotiating table, much less headed a negotiations team. But I knew enough to understand the most important tasks ahead: choosing my team, creating an agenda, crafting a strategy, and navigating the Washington bureaucracy. Moreover, secrecy and time were of the essence. A leak could be fatal to the process, our seniors had given us less than a year to finish the job, and the clock was ticking.

The composition of my delegation was largely dictated by joint considerations – one representative from each the four services, an operations specialist from J-3, from J-5 an expert on Russia who had been the lead action officer for the Akhromeyev visit, and a civil servant from the Office of the Secretary of Defense to complete the representatives from DoD stake-holders. On further thought, I added a member from the State Department to ensure buy-in from the Foggy Bottom crowd; then I rounded out my team by reaching back to Air Force XOO and engineering an assignment for Major Don Pettit to J-5, installing him at my right hand. His special talents for leadership, fresh thinking, hard, grinding work, and an intuitive grasp of my needs would be indispensable. The relationship we forged over the following twelve months led to an extraordinarily creative and productive partnership that sustained me for the remainder of my career.

After assembling the team, my first objective was getting them on the same page with me by focusing on my agenda for the negotiation. It included a half-dozen objectives flowing from the most serious incidents that had given rise to our charter. Foremost among them, in my view, was the necessity to deal with the eventuality of aircraft, ships, or troops straying across national boundaries. While our discussions would deal with uniformed personnel and their equipment, my concern was driven by a horrific incident five years earlier. A Soviet air-defense pilot, in response to orders from the commander of
Joint Staff Deputy Director (1987 – 1989)

the Far East Military District, shot down an off-course South Korean airliner that had unintentionally penetrated Soviet airspace. The Boeing 747 had 269 souls on board including a U.S. congressman and 22 children under the age of twelve. Moscow insisted that the act was legitimate, claiming that the aircraft could have been on a spy mission. Nothing illustrated better for me the abysmal state of relations between East and West than this premeditated murder in the name of protecting sovereign airspace. Some of my delegation considered this a fool’s errand, but I would not be dissuaded.

Second, I devised a negotiating strategy premised on two assumptions: no subject should be considered beyond our authority to address; and, a close personal relationship between me and my Russian counterpart was essential to building the trust on which a meaningful outcome would hinge. Therefore, I was determined that the initial session be held at the Pentagon, which would allow me to set the stage – physical, intellectual and personal. It would also allow us to overwhelm the Soviet delegation with hospitality. As most of them had never previously visited the United States, they would almost certainly harbor deep suspicions about our country, its citizens, and its purposes. I wanted to dispel those notions from the outset and focus as much time on creating personal bonds as on agreeing to our work program.

Third, given our ironclad timeline for putting an agreement together, I made a list of seventeen agencies and institutions I knew would have a say in the approval process, and I thereafter made it my personal business to brief the most senior person in every one of them before and after each of our six negotiating sessions.

Finally, so there would be no surprises among our stakeholders about our intentions, I insisted that we create a mock agreement, in precise legal form, that represented exactly how we wanted the final document to read – word for word.

In keeping with the second objective, I drafted a letter for Admiral Crowe to send to Marshal Akhromeyev proposing that the inaugural meeting be in the U.S. and naming me as the host. To my delight, the marshal agreed and, in his reply, introduced my counterpart, a one-star general-major by the name of Anatoly Bolyatko, who would be accompanied by a delegation of nine. That precisely mirrored my own team, whose composition I had made sure to include as an attachment to the Chairman’s letter. Soon thereafter, I sent my counterpart an introductory letter proposing an early October date for the initial session, to which General Bolyatko agreed. That settled, I had two other major pieces to put in place – a small team of experts to handle all of the complex logistics associated with hosting foreign visitors, most especially Soviets;
and two of the best interpreters I could get my hands on. In both cases I hit the
jackpot. The Chairman arranged for the Defense Intelligence Agency (to whom
our overseas military attachés report) to provide a pair of exceptional escorts
with deep experience in managing trips by foreign dignitaries. And my State
Department rep worked his own magic, putting at my disposal Bill Hopkins and
Peter Afanasenko, who were detailed from the White House where they were
the lead interpreters for the President in his dealings with General Secretary
Gorbachev. That fact would not be lost on the Soviet delegation.

I had selected the opening date of the visit to be on a Saturday, in order to
give our visitors a respite from their travels and a couple of days to adjust to
the time change. I put them up in a high-quality hotel in Pentagon City, a spiffy
neighborhood five minutes from where we would meet, and arranged for ev-
ery amenity to be provided, to include free access to their mini-bars. The place
was spectacular, underscoring that our negotiations would enjoy unstinting
support. General Bolyatko and his delegation flew into Dulles International
Airport just after dusk on a cool, rainy evening. Dorene and I met them at
the foot of a ramp reserved for high-ranking foreign visitors. Dressed in civil-
ian clothes, they came single-file down the slight incline, General Bolyatko in
the lead. About my height, solidly built, he radiated an engaging warmth and
confidence. The instant we shook hands, a feeling swept over me that this
moment was foreordained, that our work was destined to succeed, and that
General Bolyatko sensed it as well.

While waiting for the baggage, we repaired to a well-stocked hospitality
room, where I took General Bolyatko aside and walked him through the itin-
erary for the coming week. He was comfortable speaking in his impeccable
English; I had spent considerable time over the past several weeks brushing
up my Russian, which I had studied for two years while an Academy cadet,
but decided to guard my renewed facility for the time being. We were close to
the same age, and had very much the same demeanor. He was calm, alert and
seemed quite at ease. We set off for the hotel, with General Bolyatko and me
in the lead car and Dorene playing hostess on the shuttle carrying his team.
Anatoly and I talked easily en route to Pentagon City, although at one point I
was taken aback by his question regarding the residential areas through which
we passed. “General Butler,” he inquired, “are all these homes reserved
for government workers?” When I said they were privately-owned, he fell
poignantly silent.

After downtime on Sunday, at 8:00 Monday morning General Bolyatko and
I were ushered into Admiral Crowe’s office, another piece of carefully calibrated
theater intended to leverage the cardinal rule of reciprocity in American-Soviet
relations. I was, in effect, creating the agenda I wanted in Moscow during our next session: an opening audience with Marshal Akhromeyev. The Chairman played his role to perfection, stressing the importance he and the Secretary of Defense placed on our work, the crucial opportunity for us to achieve results of far-reaching importance, the necessity of concluding an agreement in time for a signing ceremony in Moscow the following June, and that I spoke for him in our deliberations. General Bolyatko paid rapt attention. I was certain every word would be faithfully recorded, reported, and reiterated by Marshal Akhromeyev two months hence.

We then moved to the room I had reserved for our first week’s work, where I watched carefully General Bolyatko’s reaction to the non-standard arrangement. Rather than the usual setup of the sides facing each other across a table, with the leaders in the center on each side, I had created a ‘U’-shaped arrangement, with Bolyatko and me seated side-by-side at a head table and our respective delegations arrayed down the side tables to my left and his right. My objectives were threefold: to accelerate the process of building trust with Bolyatko through close personal contact, to create opportunities for the two of us to have sidebar conversations, out of earshot of our team members, and to demonstrate that these negotiations would not have to proceed in lockstep according to the traditional rules of protocol at the bargaining table. If the arrangement bothered him, General Bolyatko concealed it perfectly. Without the slightest sign of discomfort, he took his seat with a smile and laid out his meticulously prepared briefing folders in front of him.

We started by having each of our delegation members introduce themselves, providing my first occasion to witness the masterful ability of our interpreter for this round, Peter Afanasenko. General Bolyatko had brought his own man for this duty, but it was quickly apparent that Peter’s skills were far superior. Indeed, the general himself stepped in more than once to correct his interpreter, revealing a compulsion for precision that was to prove one of his hallmarks. The remainder of the day was devoted to hammering out the many details that attend every negotiation, such as conforming the text of the innumerable draft documents that would be created over the course of our work. Since each side would be writing minutes and setting down versions of agreed statements in its native tongue, it was essential to ensure that the official copy translated precisely the same way from English to Russian and vice versa. That was no small feat, given not only the semantic gulf between the two languages, but the cultural differences that play heavily into perception and meaning. Here again, Peter’s vast experience would
prove an invaluable asset, saving countless hours of haggling over nuances
that might otherwise have been insurmountable.

On the second day, we turned to the heart of our business: choosing the
“dangerous military activities” we would focus on. This posed a particularly
delicate problem for me in that virtually all of the incidents had arisen either
from deliberate Soviet actions, apparently sanctioned by the highest authority,
or from poor discipline on the part of individual units or individuals. I wanted to
avoid getting into a blame game, particularly when General Bolyatko revealed
his list, which included U.S. spy planes patrolling Russian borders and subma-
rines tapping undersea communications cables. Each of those was an absolute
non-starter for our side, not only because of the importance of those missions,
but also because they were longstanding practices that both nations had long
since accepted as the price of enduring military competition. Consequently, I
adopted a charade of discussing the various categories of incidents as “hypo-
thenetical,” that is, as if they were practices that could happen, but had never
actually occurred. As artificial as that might seem, it worked to perfection,
greatly easing the obvious angst of our interlocutors. Indeed, it proved to be
the single most important convention associated with our work, serving simul-
taneously to build trust and avoid long, counterproductive diatribes.

Work on setting our negotiation agenda consumed the remainder of the
week, a long and difficult march that led to some initial agreement but which
unfortunately, albeit not unexpectedly, did not include the necessity to deal
amicably with peacetime cross-border aircraft incursions. General Bolyatko
made crystal clear that this issue was above his pay grade and would therefore
have to await our next session, in Moscow, for resolution. Sensing his unease,
I did not object to holding the matter in abeyance. My admiration and respect
for this man grew by the hour and the day. He had a first-rate mind, a natural
graciousness, and a knowledge of U.S. political and military history that put
my own to shame. One morning, as we walked the halls of the Pentagon dur-
ing an informal tour, he pointed out several Revolutionary War figures whose
portraits graced the corridor walls and gave me a thumbnail sketch of the role
each had played in our fight for independence. Later, during a drive through
Arlington Cemetery, I commented that my middle name had a tie to Robert E.
Lee. He replied that I therefore had a tie to Nelly Custis, great grandmother of
the general’s wife. He would have made a million bucks on Jeopardy.

By the end of the week, we had covered all of the essential opening points
and had laid out a very substantive agenda for what we agreed would be an
eyear-December second round in Moscow. We closed on a social note, with a
dinner at one of Old Towne Alexandria’s finest restaurants. I could not have
Joint Staff Deputy Director (1987 – 1989)

been more pleased with our progress, and I felt very confident that we were going to pull this off. My only real reservation had to do with the one agenda item we had put off until our meeting six weeks hence. It would prove to be the single most historic and productive aspect of the negotiations.

We reported out to Admiral Crowe just prior to General Bolyatko’s departure. He was clearly impressed by my ready access to, and easy relationship with, the Chairman. I was keenly interested to see how this would work out on his end.

During the interval between the first and second rounds, my team conducted an assessment of the Soviet delegation and the week’s activities. The most important lesson was the need to find a faster way to deal with the “conforming” process between our written products, which was agonizingly slow on the Russian side. Indeed, much of their work had to await their return to Moscow, then be sent to us via Embassy pouch. Don Pettit reached into his bag of tricks and came up with what was then a cutting-edge innovation: translating software. That allowed us to create both an English and Russian version of our minutes, which we then gave to General Bolyatko to correct. Again, to his credit, he recognized the benefit of this initiative, set aside whatever reservations he may have had about working from a text we had created, and agreed to make this procedure the basis of our conforming work through the entire negotiation.

Consequently, when we departed for Moscow on Friday evening, the 3rd of December, 1988, the administrative decks had been cleared, and we were primed to plunge into the substance of our charter – preventing dangerous military incidents. Our flight, Pan Am 030 out of New York’s JFK airport, was itself unique, owing to a U.S.-Soviet diplomatic arrangement that allowed a specified number of annual flights between JFK and Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport, utilizing joint crews. Fortunately, we were in business class, because the plane was packed for the holiday break; economy class was jammed with Russian nationals bearing armfuls of packages and smoking to beat the band. The non-stop flight was long, noisy, tiring, and by its end, noxious with the smell of nicotine. I slept fitfully, a bit anxious about setting foot for the first time on the soil of my career-long enemy. To make matters worse, the weather was awful, the letdown was entirely through clouds, and the runway appeared only in the final few seconds. When we touched down, the surface was so rough that I thought for an instant that we had landed short. After the aircraft finally slowed enough to turn onto a taxiway, I noted that several of the field’s taxi lights were not functioning; in some cases the glass housings were actually broken. My respect for Soviet aviation was fast receding.
The terminal was in no better repair, a drab place populated by grim-faced functionaries who had no enthusiasm for us or their work. Once through Customs, we were greeted by General Bolyatko and his delegation, and, as I had expected, taken to a hospitality area with somewhat better appointments and a few plates of finger-food. Once the baggage was gathered, we were led to a waiting line of black cars and began one of the wildest rides of my life. Led into Moscow by a manic police escort, we brute-forced our way through traffic. I literally cringed as our motorcycle-mounted cavalry beat on cars with their truncheons and challenged oncoming traffic to move aside by riding directly into the face of the startled motorists. At one point, as my driver strove mightily to hold his place in the convoy, he downshifted so violently that the floor-mounted gear lever came loose from its moorings.

By the time we reached our destination, I was physically and emotionally depleted, but General Bolyatko seemed not the least bit perturbed. He led us into the lobby of what proved to be a rather decent hotel, owned and managed by the Soviet military establishment. Tired as I was, I could not help but notice during our elevator ascent that there was one fewer floor selection buttons than the number of floors I had counted on our arrival. My surmise was that the recording systems for the microphones I imagined to be hidden throughout the structure, along with the personnel who manned them, resided on the unmarked floor. After a careful search of my spacious suite, I indeed found a listening device secreted under the slightly loosened cover plate of the sitting-area’s chandelier. The constant intrusion on my privacy was a bit of an annoyance, but also had its upside. If I had any special wants, such as having the temperature in my room adjusted, or an extra blanket, I simply made them known by musing aloud under the fixture. Within moments, as if by magic, my desires were granted. Nice touch, but rather a giveaway.

The room was otherwise adequate, although I had been forewarned to bring such essentials as American toilet paper, Kleenex and cleansers. The thin wafer of soap in my bathroom was meant to last a week, a fact I discovered when the maid restored from the trash to the dish on the vanity the remnant I had tossed away after one day’s use. Our meals were taken on the top floor, where a dedicated staff of cooks and servers had been installed exclusively for the use of my delegation. The menu required some cultural adaptation, the typical breakfast being unsweetened yogurt, sturdy bread with heavy jam, and beef stroganoff. That said, the food was quite well prepared and very filling. All in all, our accommodations were satisfactory, although rather more, well, intimate than I would have preferred. In addition to the constant auditory monitoring, each floor was supervised by a rotating shift of women, seated
at tables in the long central hallway, who recorded the comings and goings of the guests. Try as I might, I could never crack the stern façade of my assigned “dezhurnaya,” who must have considered completely daft my practice of running a mile up and down the corridor every evening.

Sunday was, as I had anticipated, a down day, and I took the occasion to visit with my friend and former colleague from the Air Force Academy Political Science Department, Erv Rokke, who was now a brigadier general assigned to Moscow as the U.S. Defense Attaché to the Soviet government. He and his wife Pam lived in lovely quarters inside the guarded compound of the new American Embassy. Theirs was one of several units linked condominium-style that surrounded three sides of the embassy building. The embassy itself was the center of a bizarre conflict between the two governments, owing to the fact that, for reasons that defy belief, the U.S. State Department had accepted the Soviet demand that domestic construction firms erect the building. When the completed structure was swept by surveillance experts, it was found to be riddled with listening devices of every kind, to include the capability to monitor electric typewriters. The embassy was declared unusable, save for a specially-built clean room on the ground floor. Subsequently, at exorbitant cost, it had to be deconstructed, brick by brick, floor by floor, and rebuilt from scratch. In contrast, the private quarters had been built by a Swedish company and were free of embedded intrusive devices. However, the Soviets were so good at this game that the residents still had to assume that anything they said was being monitored. It probably was, given the powerful array of listening equipment installed in the spire of a former Russian Orthodox Church across the street from the compound, referred to by the Americans as “Our Lady of Surveillance.”

Erv proved indispensable as a friend in whom I could confide and as an expert source of intelligence and insight on things Soviet. He and Pam were there at a particularly difficult time because of the brouhaha over the embassy. The U.S. government had retaliated by declaring a sizable contingent of Russian staff in their Washington Embassy persona non grata, which had prompted an eye-for-an-eye response from Moscow. Consequently, Erv was working very shorthanded, to include taking on himself the messy task of routine maintenance on the vehicles assigned to his office. After a lengthy update on the current state of affairs in Russia, we discussed the next morning’s agenda, which was to start, as I had hoped, with an 8:00 a.m. meeting with Marshal Akhromeyev in his Kremlin office. I wanted Erv to be present, both to bolster his standing with the senior Soviet leadership and to help me read the tea leaves afterwards. He agreed, as did General Bolyatko, my unflappable
interlocutor. That set the stage for what, in retrospect, I would judge to be the most important conversation I had ever undertaken.

Erv met Peter Afanasenko and me at the hotel the following morning, and our Russian driver delivered us to the appointed place at precisely five minutes before 8:00. General Bolyatko took us in tow, and we entered a breathtakingly beautiful room of grand proportions, mounted a sweeping staircase, and passed through a series of lavish corridors leading to the private offices of Marshal Akhromeyev. Promptly at eight, the doors to his inner chamber were opened, and we were ushered inside. Even having met the marshal in Washington, I was still somewhat awed by his presence. A quiet, dignified man, he exuded a personal strength and depth of experience that commanded respect. A Hero of the Soviet Union, he had been a tank commander in the Second World War, earning well-deserved fame in some of the most brutal battles of the conflict. I steeled myself for what was to come. I had one chance to persuade him on a point that his culture and professional experience would compel him to reject.

Flanked on the left by Peter Afanasenko and on the right by General Rokke, I sat on one side of a long table running down the middle of the office. Across from us sat the marshal, General Bolyatko and their interpreter. The table was bare except for one yellow legal pad and pencil at Marshal Akhromeyev’s fingertips. He opened with a narrative that closely echoed Admiral Crowe’s guidance to us in the Pentagon and rang with equal sincerity. He then asked me for my assessment of where things stood and what I hoped to achieve in this round.

I began by carefully detailing the candidate issues the two sides had discussed in Washington and narrowed the list to those that I thought were most appropriate and achievable, to include risky use of lasers, false navigational signals, shouldering by naval vessels, and border incursions, especially by aircraft. He listened in silence and then addressed each point in turn. Everything was possible to consider, he said, including incursions by ground or naval forces. However, he stressed, aircraft were an entirely different matter, because of their speed and capacity to inflict severe damage in the event the incursion was premeditated and hostile. Therefore, this issue must be tabled until our mutual relations had advanced to a much more profound state of trust. “Marshal Akhromeyev,” I replied, “I understand your concern and its merits. However, I would urge you to reconsider, given the fact that our relations have already improved to the point that we now routinely have each other’s aircraft, both civil and military, flying within our respective borders. For example, as we speak, you are aware that U.S. C-141 cargo aircraft are ferrying
inspection teams and their equipment to nuclear-armed missile sites in your country in keeping with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. With all due respect, might I ask what you would do if one of these aircraft strayed off course, perhaps due to weather or equipment malfunction, and inadvertently overflew one of your restricted areas without proper clearance? Surely you would not shoot the aircraft down.”

The room became very quiet as Peter completed the translation. General Bolyatko stared straight ahead, unblinking, and Erv stared at me in utter wonderment. After what seemed an interminable silence, Marshal Akhромеев pulled the legal pad forward, lifted the pencil and wrote in a precise hand the designation “C-141,” which he forcefully underscored. He then looked at me and said, “You make a legitimate point, but this is not something I can decide. I will address it tonight with our leader, and you shall have an answer shortly.”

With that, the meeting ended, and we departed for the hotel, where a large conference room had been set aside for our work. No one spoke a word en route, and I was gravely concerned that I had overstepped my bounds with General Bolyatko and his master. Nonetheless, I was convinced that the risk had been worth taking, on the chance that by some miracle we might pull this off.

After I had arisen from a fitful sleep and picked over my breakfast, the delegations gathered for the start of Tuesday’s session. General Bolyatko introduced the morning agenda by commenting in off-hand fashion that, based on guidance from Akhромеев, an item would be added: border incursions by military aircraft. I was at once overcome with relief and electrified by the news, which I could hardly believe, given the casual manner in which it had been delivered. This was a stunning leap forward, one that now posed a complex operational question: how, in an acutely tense situation, could communications be established between opposing aircraft, allowing their pilots to give and receive instructions quickly and accurately, when neither spoke the other’s language? We agreed that the import of the issue demanded a special focus, so we created a separate panel of experts who would devote themselves solely to this question.

From this point forward I knew that success was assured, requiring only continuing diligence on the part of our delegations to flesh out the approved agenda, put the final product together, and shepherd it through our respective bureaucracies. These rather remarkable eight days were made even more memorable by three other events, each historic in its own right. The first was an announcement that Marshal Akhромеев was being moved to a position as special counsel to President Gorbachev, to be replaced as Chief of the General
Staff by General Moiseyev, a rising star in the Soviet Ground Forces. As he was barely fifty years of age, this was a surprise choice, to say the least, evidently a move by Gorbachev to put his stamp on his military’s leadership. I could not help but wonder what effect the change would have on our negotiations. That concern was alleviated when General Bolyatko, sensing my unease, assured me that Gorbachev himself had approved including border incursions by military aircraft in our agenda; therefore, we need not fear any back-pedaling by Moiseyev. In fact, Gorbachev’s reformist credentials were solidified by a remarkable speech to the United Nations during a trip to New York that began the morning after the meeting during which Marshal Akhromeyev had gained Gorbachev’s blessing for our revised agenda. The world listened in amazement as the head of the most powerful totalitarian state in history stood at the podium of the General Assembly and quoted from legendary democratic thinkers as he talked about the future of the Soviet Union. Then, as he was making his return to Moscow, on the ninth of December, the Soviet Republic of Armenia was struck by a devastating earthquake, killing tens of thousands of its citizens.

By the time we made our departure the following day, I felt as if I had been through some sort of historical tsunami, a crashing tide of events that left triumph and tragedy in its wake. Looking back from a vantage point nearly thirty years removed, I would rank this as the most challenging week of my life, given the risks and the stakes. I had been tested and not found wanting at a moment when an extraordinary alignment of national leaders had made possible an historic advance in reducing forty years of oscillating tension. My role at this crucial juncture prepared me for a much larger set of responsibilities that would shortly lead to much grander opportunities to accelerate the end of the Cold War and to prepare the nation for its aftermath. That stage was further set by the announcement on the first of July of a move for Vice Admiral Jack Baldwin to be President of the National Defense University and of my selection to replace him, with a promotion to the three stars that come with the position.

There would follow four more face-to-face negotiating rounds and a signing ceremony in June 1989. Each of these episodes was replete with its own minor dramas, none of which threatened the timely completion of our work. With success all but assured, I decided to widen the orbit of our activities to include more extensive side trips in both countries and more intimate personal engagement with General Bolyatko and his delegation. Dorene and I took them to a shopping mall, a large supermarket, Wolf Trap (a beautiful outdoor theater), and a Washington Bullets basketball game. For the April negotiating session in Washington, we invited Anatoly to bring his wife, Natasha, for whom
we created an extensive itinerary. This initiative drew some push-back from our own State Department, as it was rare for spouses to attend negotiations of this sort, but my representative there was able to win approval. I don’t know what headwinds General Bolyatko might have encountered on his end, but he was also successful in clearing the bureaucratic hurdles. The visit could not have gone better. Dorene did a fabulous job in putting Natasha at ease, and they developed a strong friendship over the course of the week. We all got along famously, even spending an evening together in our Bolling AFB quarters watching “Raiders of the Lost Ark” over pizza and Cokes.

As I had hoped, General Bolyatko brought with him a reciprocal letter from the Soviet government inviting Dorene to accompany me on my May trip to Moscow. A bit miffed that she had been accorded this honor, the State Department sat on her clearance to go until the last minute, but finally relented. Our arrival in Moscow got off to a rocky start when, en route to the hotel, Dorene got desperately carsick, an attack triggered by the highly odiferous lilacs nestled alongside her in the back seat. But that passed, and we were soon enjoying our VIP treatment to the hilt. With the negotiations proceeding smoothly, I left General Bolyatko in charge of the final details while Dorene and I, accompanied by Bill Hopkins, our faithful interpreter — Peter stayed at the table in Moscow — made an overnight visit to Leningrad (originally and ultimately, St. Petersburg). What should have been an unremarkable interlude quickly turned into a highly instructive look behind the scenes of a Soviet Union in its last days. The flight on Aeroflot was an adventure none of us would care to repeat. Moscow’s domestic terminal was a chaotic holding-pen where dozens of hopeful passengers fought for a place in line. We were given priority boarding and were shuttled to the plane in a small passenger van. No sooner were we seated than a cattle truck pulled up, and we watched in disbelief as its occupants spilled out the back and began fighting each other for access to the plane and its remaining seats, none of which were apparently assigned. The system was some combination of first-come, first-served, and survival of the fittest. The flight attendants headed for the cockpit and did not reappear until the carnage was complete. Finally, the door was closed and we began to taxi, at which moment a small truck raced to a stop just in front of the left wing, where I had a clear view. Another uniformed crew member piled out, frantically waving at the pilot, who reluctantly stopped and took his chagrined copilot on board. You can’t make this stuff up.

At this point, I began seriously to question the wisdom of this adventure, but there was no turning back. Dorene and I, and Bill and an embassy escort,
were seated in a curious arrangement, the two of us facing the two of them across a bare wooden table which was not stowed for takeoff. Safety, in fact, did not seem to figure in any aspect of this operation. Few of the passengers elected to wear their seat belts, several were still milling around while we were taxiing, and there was no pre-departure briefing. En route, the attendants eventually showed up with a tray of drinks, none of which appeared potable, particularly not the water, which was warm. And murky.

After landing in Leningrad, we took a cab from the airport to the home of our host, the U.S. Consul General in St. Petersburg. Ten minutes into the drive, I discovered that I had left my topcoat on the airplane, and I asked Bill to direct the driver to turn around and return to the terminal. His request drew a long and irate reply, the essence of which was, “I go off duty the minute this ride is over, and I don’t want to make it any longer than it already is.”

Bill then repeated the instruction with some veiled threat about imminent unemployment, and the driver abruptly wheeled around and sped back to the airport, smoke coming from his ears. I leaped out at the curb, raced through the mostly deserted terminal, spotted our plane now relocated some three hundred yards out on the tarmac, but still accessible, and headed in its direction. To my astonishment, no one challenged me when I boarded the aircraft and retrieved my coat. As a career aviator, and as a safety expert, all this seemed to me a bizarre way to run a flying operation.

We set out again at breakneck speed and were deposited unceremoniously at our destination, where we were warmly accommodated by the Consul General and his wife. After tea and a chance to freshen up, they had a treat in store: an evening at an underground Russian nightclub that offered dinner, dancing, and a floorshow. While such an operation was not officially permitted, enough money had evidently changed hands to permit its clandestine existence. What followed had to be seen to be believed. Whisked to a seedy corner of the city, we descended a set of concrete stairs at whose foot the Consul General knocked on a weather-beaten door. A faceplate slid open, passwords were exchanged, and we were welcomed inside by a Russian version of a Roaring 20s Chicago mobster, replete with white suit, black shirt, white tie, and black eye patch. He escorted us into a two-level room, whose lower chamber was configured for stadium seating, with dinner tables strung along each of the several tiers rising from a central stage. We squeezed around our narrow table and dined on a fixed-price offering while a motley crew of musicians set up.

Finally, a disheveled master of ceremonies materialized from behind a thread-bare velvet curtain and introduced the opening act, a line of chorus
“girls,” caked in makeup and wearing fishnet stockings that had long exceeded their life expectancy. The entertainment went from bad to worse, culminating with a Lenny Bruce-style comedian whose rant on Russia-in-decline enraged some in the audience. He was given the hook just before they rushed the stage. Our evening ended with dancing, which Dorene and I attempted for the sake of our host, who was quite proud of having found this cutting-edge example of Russia in transition. The mob joining us looked like characters from a Damon Runyon novel. Indeed, right out of central casting appeared a five-foot-four Godfather shuffling around the floor with his face firmly planted in the ample bosom of his six-foot bottle-blonde partner.

The following day our cultural sights were considerably elevated with a tour of the Hermitage, Russia’s world-renowned museum that houses some three million pieces of art chronicling world cultural history from the Stone Age through the twentieth century. The number and variety of paintings alone staggered the mind, room after room filled floor to ceiling with priceless treasures by the greatest artists from across history. Sadly, what was also evident was the desperately poor state of repair of the buildings and grounds.

The return trip to Moscow was uneventful, but on rejoining my delegation I sensed that the tenor of our negotiations had changed for the worse. Decidedly so. Then came a knock at the door, and I was informed that my wife needed to speak with me. I knew she would not interrupt our work without good reason, and my concern was heightened when she silently handed me a note that said, “We need to go back to the room – NOW!” Once in our chamber, she led me to the bathroom, turned on the water to mask our conversation, and told me that she had just talked to Erv Rokke, who had driven to the hotel, gotten past the KGB guard by asking to see Mrs. Butler, wife of General Butler and an “old friend.” The guard, perhaps sniffing a hint of exploitable scandal, let him into the hotel, where he sought out Dorene and took her to the hotel parking lot to avoid the ubiquitous microphones. There, he advised her that a Russian MIG-29 pilot had defected to Turkey, and until it could sort out the particulars of the incident, the Soviet government was showing its displeasure by putting a damper on all relations with the United States. Ergo, General Bolyatko’s suddenly unpleasant demeanor had been feigned in response to orders having nothing to do with our business. Ergo, my only recourse at this point was to wait patiently while his superiors decided on their next step. As it turned out, our negotiations were quickly exempted from the edict; by midnight, things were back to normal.

This May round ended with a side trip that General Bolyatko had arranged, at my request, to the academy just outside Moscow where the elite Soviet
Spetsnaz forces trained. USSR counterparts to the U.S. Special Forces, they were the vanguard of Russian military army capabilities. I had studied them for years and wanted to get an up-close view of their world. What I saw was shocking, even for a former SAC IG who thought he had seen it all. The school was dilapidated, its facilities rundown, its equipment antiquated and its instructional methods Byzantine. The students were treated disparagingly by their officers, who held them in contempt even in my presence. I was embarrassed for them and angry at the entire spectacle. No soldier should be treated with such indignity, however unworthy his government.

That moment of clarity regarding the vaunted Spetsnaz was the final blow in demolishing the image of the Soviet Union I had been conditioned to hold, from my cadet days on: an Evil Empire bent on global domination whose ideological, economic and military prowess had to be held in check through eternal vigilance and superior counterforce. While that strategic view was periodically validated by aggressive Soviet actions, by the mid-1980s the empire had rotted to the core. It had become a superannuated state burdened by a central authority and ideology that had depleted its people and its resources. While its military strength, including its daunting array of nuclear forces, was still formidable, as a nation it was now a failing, shoddy, tottering giant on the verge of collapse.

This transformation in my thinking had actually begun before I first set foot on Russian soil. The intellectual stage for my epiphany had been established by a prolonged reexamination, begun in early 1988, of my ingrained strategic beliefs and assumptions. By late spring of that year, my understanding of U.S. intelligence gathering and reporting, military planning and programming, and, most importantly, nuclear strategy and posture, were in a state of considerable flux.

I was prompted to commit my evolving perspectives to paper by an invitation to give the students of the National War College a capstone lecture on national security strategy, an annual presentation by a senior practitioner of the art designed to bring focus to nine months of classroom work. I spoke from several pages of notes on a yellow legal pad titling the lecture “Tides, Trends, and Tasks: The Security Environment of the Twenty-First Century” (Appendix A). I introduced my evolving world view by postulating two immutable forces, global in extent and historic in scope, that would shatter the balance of terror that had shaped U.S. national security policy and planning for forty years. The first force I compared to a tidal wave pounding against the sea wall of civilization and threatening the five-hundred-year-old organizing structure centered on the nation-state. I described this force as “the continuing fractionation of
mankind into highly ethnocentric entities seeking self-determination within self-defined borders,” a modern-day renewal of the ages-old assaults that had brought nations to ruin and empires to collapse.

I likened the second force to an outgoing tide, more calming in effect and appearance, but fraught with riptides that could doom the unwary. I portrayed it as “the compelling quest for a higher order of economic well-being, but in a world where physical and human resources are arbitrarily allocated according to the dictates of history, geography and culture.” While dangling the carrot of global prosperity through cooperative endeavor, it hid in its wake the nightmare world of physical and human exploitation, greed, envy, and depravity.

The balance of the lecture was devoted to identifying the most urgent security challenges of the period, or “Trends,” likely to emerge from the effects of these tidal forces, and the associated “Tasks” that would confront the graduates as they advanced to positions of greater responsibility in the nation’s national security hierarchy. The trends I identified as: 1) the inevitable collapse of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact; 2) the economic and political integration of Western Europe; 3) renewed and wider turmoil in the Middle East; 4) uneven global development giving rise to wide swaths of human misery plagued by drugs, debt, famine, poverty, and disease; 5) the dawn of deadly new “-isms:” xenophobic nationalism, radical fundamentalism, unbridled terrorism, and murderous tribalism; and 6) the incipient rise of new hegemonic powers seeking to impose imperial sway over bordering nations and regions.

The lecture prompted an extended question and answer period. Although other speakers had opined on the fate of the Soviet Union well before me, I tried to add a note of certainty about the impending dissolution of the Soviet Union and ensuing consequences for a Western World that would be loosed from its familiar strategic moorings. Whatever impact the presentation had on my audience, I cannot overstate the importance that thinking it through had for me in the months and years to come. It prepared me not only for the negotiations with General Bolyatko, but also for what would soon be the second-most-important conversation of my career, with General Colin Powell, some four months after the negotiations culminated.

On that score, Anatoly and I wrapped up our work, set the 12th of June for the signing ceremony, and I returned home, where the Washington Post pulled the pin on a grenade. My greatest concern from the outset of these extremely sensitive talks had been a leak to the press. That fear had been realized back in January of 1989, when I got a call from Jeffrey R. Smith, a lead defense writer for the Washington Post, who had gotten wind of the negotiations and wanted “to confirm a few details” before going to press with the story. This would
have violated my crucial understanding with General Bolyatko that we would hold these matters close from beginning to end. Given its contentiousness, the whole enterprise could easily collapse under the weight of public debate over how to deal with military aircraft crossing sovereign boundaries. Further, should we succeed, it was imperative that both nations be able to claim equal credit. I asked Jeff to come to my office to talk. He came immediately, and after listening to my concerns, he agreed to cut a deal. The story would be held until the day after the signing of the agreement in return for an exclusive to the Post. I considered that the best possible outcome of a bad bargain, one that risked losing good will with other media outlets, but that protected the agreement.

Thinking this base was covered – I had kept Jeff well informed of our progress – my team and I departed for Moscow on the 10th of June, two days before the signing ceremony. Admiral Crowe arrived the next day, to a warm greeting from his new counterpart, General Moiseyev, who hosted an elaborate dinner honoring the Chairman and the work of the two delegations. The feelings of bonhomie, however, evaporated shortly after the evening ended. Word came from the Soviet Embassy in Washington that the Post was going to break the story on the morning of the 12th in an edition that would hit the stands just as the agreement was being signed, thereby trumping the Soviet government’s version scheduled to be published in the June 13th edition of Pravda. General Bolyatko was understandably upset, but, once more to his credit, he cooled off considerably when I took him through the history of my deal with Jeff Smith. On that score, my initial anger with Smith was muddled by the fact that the story broke over the byline of Bob Woodward, of Watergate fame, creating a puzzle for me to solve after I returned to the States. Fortunately, there were no official repercussions on the Soviets’ part, so the signing ceremony went on as planned at 2:00 p.m. Moscow time.

We arrived at the appointed place, a splendid public hall filled with press. The two principals, accompanied by General Bolyatko and me, were taken to a side chamber for a private briefing on the proceedings, which involved the usual dual signing of reciprocal copies of the agreement. My role was to stand at Admiral Crowe’s shoulder, ensure that his pen went to the proper line, and manage the exchange of texts between the two rounds of signatures. As we took our places at an elaborately adorned table, I noted that my Chairman seemed a bit anxious. As he took his seat, he turned to me and said, half-jokingly, “You know, Lee, I’ve never really read all of this that thoroughly. What the hell am I signing?” “Not to worry, sir,” I replied with a straight face. “You are bequeathing to me all of your worldly assets.” With that, he laughed, relaxed,
and said, “Man, are you going to be disappointed.” From there, things went swimmingly, and we retired to another grand room for a round of drinks. In the course of the toasts and congratulations, Admiral Crowe pulled me aside, put his arm around my shoulders, and said, “Lee, I want you to know that in all my years in uniform I consider this one of my crowning achievements. I cannot thank you enough for making this moment possible.” I deeply appreciated his obviously heartfelt comment, although in the grand sweep of his career, I’m sure this hardly rated a footnote.

After the reception, General Bolyatko and I held a press conference, answering questions for nearly an hour, to include several from Mike Wallace who was his usual cynical, acerbic self. When he tried to diminish the effect of the agreement, I reminded him that its import went far beyond words on paper. Its true value lay in allowing longstanding adversaries to find common ground on issues that traditionally they would never imagine even addressing, much less resolving. The process had built relationships from the highest levels of policy making to the nitty-gritty world of daily military operations. And, oh by the way, it had also put in place meaningful, effective procedures to preclude or defuse an array of dangerous military incidents that, left unchecked, could easily spin out of control. With that, Wallace seemed mollified and aired off. Happily, others present had a more favorable view of our achievement. Years later, I would have a delicious opportunity to square the books with Mike Wallace.

Immediately following these concluding events, I was on a plane to Washington and, from there, straight on to Los Angeles with Dorene to attend Lisa’s graduation from UCLA. It was a glorious affair, our daughter was positively luminous, and we were overcome with pride watching her receive her diploma. This milestone was quickly followed by another, Brett’s wedding in early July to Lee Hegwood, whom he had met during his tour at Randolph, just outside San Antonio, Texas. She was the daughter of a senior Air Force NCO, and on first meeting a vivacious, very talkative young lady, full of energy and by all appearances madly in love with our son.

On return to Washington, I had one bit of unfinished business to attend to with respect to the negotiations. Dorene helped me fill in the blanks regarding the premature story in the Post. Shortly after my departure on the 10th of June, she had fielded a call from Woodward, who wanted to talk to me. Sensing that he was up to no good, she put him off by responding simply that I was not available. From that, he surmised that I was in fact in Moscow. Then, from another source, he apparently figured out the signing date. Armed with these facts, I called Jeff Smith and asked him to come to my office, which he did with
some trepidation because he knew what was coming. I unloaded on him with both barrels, my anger over what I considered a betrayal of our agreement still just below the boiling point. He took it calmly, and set about explaining that Bob Woodward had gotten wind of the impending agreement from other sources and had pulled rank at the Post, putting the story out over his by-line and on his time line. Given his enduring Watergate fame, I had no doubt that Bob had the clout – and the gall – to pull a stunt like this. Indeed, I had some history with Woodward, amounting to five hours of off-the-record conversation a year earlier on a flight returning us to D.C. from a high-tone, civilian-led conference on European security. I told Jeff that, so far as I was concerned, our agreement had been a matter of integrity, regardless of internal Washington Post pecking order, and that he could have at least given me a head’s up. With that, I told him our relationship, such as it was, was over and he could relay to Woodward that I never wanted to hear from him again, either.

I am sure Bob Woodward lost no sleep over a closed channel to the Joint Staff J-5, and Jeff Smith took it all in stride. I would later rethink my decision to cut the Post off, if only because it would come to suit my purposes. I had learned a valuable lesson about the Washington media and the workings of its flagship newspaper. The day would come when I allowed Jeff to reenter my life and collaborate on another story that would take the world by storm.

And thus ends Volume I, The Formative Years, of schooling, teaching, personal and professional crises, broad operational and staff responsibilities, and entry-level executive roles. Unaccountable events and a host of mentors now usher in The Transformative Years, which wrought a dramatic change in my personal and professional beliefs and behavior, as chronicled in Volume II.
Commander of the 320th Bomb Wing at Mather AFB near Sacramento, CA, in 1983. While the unit received many accolades during my tenure, it was also scarred by two B-52 accidents: a visiting aircraft on takeoff, and one of my wing’s bombers on the parking ramp. The first cost ten lives, the second an expensive repair.
Our farewell party at Mather, in June, 1984, the setting inspired by my oft-quoted line, “It’s great to be the King.” In a similar affair on our departure from Griffiss AFB in 1979, Brett played me in a skit premised on my infamous three-hour Friday morning staff meetings. The roast was entitled “Butler’s Last Stand.”
A mock pinning ceremony at Dyess AFB, TX, on the day my promotion to one-star general was announced. I was sent to this base to prepare it for the arrival of the SAC’s first B-1 bomber with the charge from my 4-star boss to “Fix it.” That gave rise to the draconian “Butler’s Back to Basics” Program to remedy a host of problems stemming from lack of discipline.
On the porch of Quarters 10 at Offutt AFB, Bellevue, NE, during my tour as Inspector General of Strategic Air Command in 1984-86. This two-year stint would serve me extremely well. I gained a detailed knowledge of the organization to which I would return as commander in 1991. Dorene holds our beloved Stormy, our first Corgi, who lived over 17 years.
Brett’s commissioning ceremony following graduation from Cal Berkeley in 1985, where he completed a business degree and commanded the ROTC detachment. After his four-year Air Force tour, he married; finished Harvard Business School; welcomed his first daughter; and joined his first company, Procter & Gamble.
In mid-1988, I was tapped by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe to head U.S. negotiations with the Soviet military that produced the Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities. Here, my Soviet counterpart General Anatoly Bolyatko and I had just received the Admiral's guidance, soon to be echoed in Moscow by Anatoly’s superior, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev.
The signing ceremony took place in Moscow on the 12th of June, 1989. General Bolyatko is to the right of General Mikhail Moiseyev, who had replaced Marshal Akhromeyev as Admiral Crowe’s Soviet counterpart. Admiral Crowe brought with him the military service Vice Chiefs, including the Marine and Air Force four-star officers at my left flanking the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock.
I flew from the Moscow signing ceremony to D.C., where I joined Dorene for a trip to Los Angeles for Lisa’s graduation from UCLA. She earned a degree in Psychology; worked in a law office; attended Samuel Merritt School of Nursing; joined an oncology equipment firm; and met her husband Mike Herring.
I was promoted to three stars in mid-1989 and moved up from the deputy position to be the Director of Strategic Plans and Policy on the Joint Staff, briefly serving Admiral Crowe and then his successor, General Colin Powell. Here Dorene and I are welcomed by the new Chairman and his wife Alma to their quarters on Ft. Myer, VA.
Glossary

AF:  Air Force
AFA: Air Force Academy; Air Force Association
AFB:  Air Force Base
AFBIT:  Air Force Budget Issues Team
AFSC:  Armed Forces Staff College
ALCM:  Air Launched Cruise Missile
ATC:  Air Training Command
ATO:  Air Training Officer
AWACS:  Airborne Warning and Control System
AWOL:  Absent Without Leave
BX:  Base Exchange
CEVG:  Combat Evaluation Group
CIA:  Central Intelligence Agency
CINC:  Commander-in-Chief
CINCSAC:  Commander-in-Chief, Strategic Air Command
CJCS:  Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
CSAF:  Chief of Staff, United States Air Force
DCM:  Deputy Commander for Maintenance
DCO:  Deputy Commander for Operations
DCS:  Deputy Chief of Staff
DMZ:  De-militarized Zone
DJS:  Director Joint Staff
DoD:  Department of Defense
EOB:  Executive Office Building
EWO:  Emergency War Order; Electronic Warfare Officer
FAC:  Forward Air Controller
HASC:  House Armed Services Committee
ICBM:  Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
IG:  Inspector General
IP:  Instructor Pilot
J-2:  Directorate of Intelligence (on a joint, or multi-military service staff)
J-3:  Directorate of Operations
Glossary

J-4: Directorate of Logistics
J-5: Directorate of Strategic Plans and Policy
J-8: Directorate of Force Structure, Resources and Assessment
JSTPS: Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff
LAX: Los Angeles International Airport
MAC: Military Airlift Command
MAJCOM: Major Command
MITO: Minimum Interval Take-Off
MMII/MMIII: Successive generations of the United States Minuteman ICBM
MOQ: Married Officer Quarters
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO: Non-Commissioned Officer
NMS: National Military Strategy
NUWEP: Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy
OEP: Office of Emergency Planning
OER: Officer Effectiveness Report
ORI: Operational Readiness Inspection
OSD: Office of the Secretary of Defense
OWC: Officers Wives Club
PA&E: Program Analysis and Evaluation
ROTC: Reserve Officer Training Corps
SAC: Strategic Air Command
SALT: Strategic Arms Limitations Talks
Science Po: Institut d’Études Politiques (in Paris, France)
SIOP: Single Integrated Operational Plan
SLBM: Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile
SOS: Squadron Officer School
START: Strategic Arms Reduction Talks
TAC: Tactical Air Command
TRIAD: Comprising nuclear weapon capable bombers, ICBMs and SLBMs
VOQ: Visiting Officers Quarters
APPENDICES

Mankind stands at the threshold of a global upheaval not seen since the era that opened in August, 1914, when ancient borders were redrawn, kingdoms vanished, the colonial paradigm was shattered and the seeds of enduring enmity were planted in every corner of the globe. The fragile peace that ended World War I only provided breathing room for a renewal of hostilities on a scale not seen in human history. The loose ends set the stage for an unraveling that left Germany bent on revenge, the Mid-East rife with instability, a continuing revolution in Russia that set the stage for virulent communism, and Japan thirsting for conquest. When the inevitable resolution of these immutable forces arrived, the world witnessed a scale of warfare, depravity, and destruction that no one imagined could be exceeded, much less repeated. As in 1918, hopes were high for the establishment of an international regime of institutions and legal strictures that would forever preclude a renewal of resort to such evil motives and violent intent.

And, as had been the case for the League of Nations, the United Nations was quickly rendered ineffective, caught in the crossfire of differing views of sovereignty and security among the five nations comprising the permanent members of the Security Council. As the debate descended into gridlock and Stalin began to impose his will on the shattered nations of Eastern Europe, his momentous decision to block ground travel into Berlin ushered in the Cold War, bringing down an Iron Curtain, in Churchill’s piercing analogy, across the heart of the continent. When the Soviet Union exploded its first atom bomb in 1949, an arms race was set in motion, fueled by an ideological conflict that left no room for compromise. The world was condemned to a half-century at the nuclear brink, thousands of weapons on hair-trigger alert, competing arsenals that in their totality threatened the very existence of life on this earth as we know it.

The costs and risks of this confrontation are virtually incalculable.
Expenditures for the nuclear enterprise alone, in all of its complex dimensions, have exceeded six trillion dollars. The inherent danger of forces on high alert, the manifest reality of Mutual Assured Destruction, was graphically exposed in the Cuban Missile crisis, when the world escaped an all-out nuclear holocaust by some combination of diplomatic skill, sheer luck, and perhaps divine intervention. Beyond the recurring crises, however, the human toll of nations in bondage to a soulless communism staggers the imagination. Together with the continuing conflicts and wars triggered by the global competition of the super powers, from Korea to Vietnam; the brutal suppression of uprisings as in Budapest and Prague; the hidden horrors of the clandestine activities of intelligence agencies; and the opportunity costs of monumental resources diverted to either expanding or containing communism, the advance of civilization was halted in its tracks.

For those engaged in ensuring the security of the United States of America in the face of such a daunting enemy, there seemed little prospect of a peaceful resolution in our lifetime. From the outside, the Soviet Union appeared monolithic and endowed with infinite resources, human and physical. Its leadership was passed from one stolid, unresponsive, occasionally antic member of the Politburo to another with numbing regularity once Stalin passed from the scene. And then in March of 1985 the unimaginable happened: Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to power. He arrived with a world view, coupled with an unvarnished assessment of the true state of his nation’s economy, that introduced a sea change in Soviet rhetoric, actions and announced intentions. The extraordinary chemistry between him and President Reagan has created opportunities in arms control, and for open, honest dialogue across a host of other issues of mutual interest. The woeful conditions in Russia, not only economic, but social as well, are now unveiled for the world to see. President Gorbachev has announced plans for both economic and political reform that cannot help but fundamentally reshape the course of his nation and by extension the Warsaw Pact, and most importantly from the standpoint of American national and military security strategy, relations with the United States and its allies.

That brings me to my central purpose this morning: to address my personal study and reflection on this remarkable series of events, and how I see the consequences affecting United States national security over the long term, hence the title of my remarks. In the most succinct expression of my thinking, I see the prospective end of the Cold War, an unthawing of the frozen state of international interaction it imposed, a renewal of forces that were reshaping the patterns of relations between sovereign states going back some 500 years,
Appendix A

and a wholly new set of circumstances, opportunities and threats facing our nation.

In my view, the forces that will reemerge from the relaxation of tensions between East and West can be distilled into two powerful tides, much as the ocean acts upon the land that holds it at bay. The first I describe as the continuing fractionation of mankind into highly ethnocentric entities seeking self-determination within self-defined borders. This is the incoming, on-rushing tide, the destructive force that creates relentless chaos and suffering as alienation overpowers harmony and compassion.

The second force is the outgoing tide, the calming, quieting of the sea that sets the stage for peaceful resolution of conflict, mutually advantageous exchange of goods and services and easing of hatred and distrust. I describe this as the compelling quest for a higher order of economic well-being, but in a world where human and physical resources are capriciously allocated according to the whims of geography, culture and history. The universal appeal of a mindboggling array of products and spectacles is a growing phenomenon, from music to movies, blue jeans to fast food, sporting events to royal marriages. Creating the institutions and protocols essential to facilitate this global interchange will require the best minds in government and business. The potential problems of patent and copyright protection, quality, and safety are enormous, and solutions must keep pace with the unquenchable advance of rising expectations.

That brings me to the trends that will inevitably attend the impact of these two defining tides, the consequences that will present themselves as explicit challenges to strategists and planners, presidents and prime ministers, business leaders and economists.

The first of these trends is the astonishing advent of a second Russian Revolution in our lifetime, bringing with it the very real prospect of the collapse of the Soviet Union as we know it, and by extension the Warsaw Pact. With that, forty years of national security strategy, planning and execution will go out the window, the defense budget will come under immense scrutiny and likely reduction, and those of you in this room who find yourself in the Pentagon in years to come, perhaps in the office where I sit, will be consumed by these cosmic consequences.

The second trend is the prospect for a 21st Century Concert of Europe, but one that takes root this time, a sweeping removal of barriers to travel and trade that creates a new market to rival any on the planet. In its wake will come the requirement to rethink not just national currencies, passports, and protectionism, but military security and alliances, and foremost among
those, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. With the demise of the Warsaw Pact, it makes no sense to me to sustain an organization which was created to respond to Soviet hegemony. That would simply perpetuate suspicion and distrust, forestalling a highly desirable rapprochement with a Russia shed of its imperial trappings.

The third trend is the intensification of intractable conflicts between mortal enemies, a renewal of competing claims, ethnic rivalries, and religious hatreds going back centuries if not millennia. These acute regional enmities will not always engage the vital interests of the United States, but the human suffering and local upheaval will surely engage our sensibilities and our resources.

The fourth and related trend is catastrophic failures in the human condition induced by the four horsemen of the modern apocalypse: virulent nationalism, murderous tribalism, religious fundamentalism and genocidal ethnocentrism. These failures will exacerbate the misery caused by debt, drugs, famine, poverty and disease so tragically prevalent in every dark corner of the earth.

The fifth trend is the prospective rise of new hegemonic powers, most especially China and India, whose burgeoning populations and sense of place in the international community will impose an exponential increase in demand on global resources and bring equally consequential demands for attention and respect in the fora of sovereign nations.

You can, I am sure, already begin to imagine the explicit tasks for strategists that emerge from this litany of trends associated with the twin tides moving through history I have enunciated this morning.

The first is for the United States, which has emerged from the Cold War as the preeminent nation on earth, to lead, to take the initiative, to show the way across the breathtaking array of problems, challenges and opportunities outlined here. When the international community dials 911 in the new era, the phone rings first in Washington, D.C., in the Oval Office to be precise. The demands on our President, his administration, and the Congress will be unprecedented, requiring the very best minds our country has to offer and a degree of cooperation harkening back to the onset of the Cold War, when programs like the Marshall Plan helped rebuild Europe and put in place a bulwark against the grasping ambitions of Stalin and his successors.

The second task is to usher Russia through a chaotic, traumatic transition from failing dictatorship to respected member of the family of democratic nations. As regards United States leadership, this in my estimation is Job One; if we don’t get this right, then the rest of the agenda that awaits will be thrust into limbo, just as it was forty years ago with the advent of the Cold War.

The third task, as I alluded to above, is to rethink the role, indeed, the very
necessity for NATO. That will require us to prod our reluctant allies to begin to think seriously about taking charge of their own security, individual and collective, without the overlying security of the United States. Given the financial and cultural barriers to such initiatives, we will have to muster great reserves of patience and fortitude.

The fourth task is to refocus our attention and energies to the two regions where our vital interests are most immediately and deeply engaged: the Mid-East/Persian Gulf and the Korean Peninsula. In the former, the reality of conflict is inevitable given the history and stakes inherent in the sovereign mix of peoples and nations. In the latter, the notoriously unstable leadership and lack of visibility into capabilities and intent will continue to perplex the best analysts and sustain tension between the North and the South Koreans.

The fifth task is to recast our policy as to China and India, which has been notoriously muddled and conflicted. This will take decades of patient dialogue and diplomacy, but over the long term it could well be determining as regards the prospects for lasting global peace.

The sixth task is to repackage, reequip and retrain our armed forces for the new world order. Shedding the ingrained patterns of thinking and acting from a half century of bitter enmity with the Soviet Union will be the greatest challenge we have faced since the onset of confrontation following the Second World War. Trillions of dollars are at stake, not to mention traditional career paths, roles and missions, and relations between the military services. This task is already in my in-box and commands the lion’s share of my attention.

Finally, and most important in my estimation, is to wind down the nuclear weapons dimension of decades at the brink of wholesale war with the Soviet Union. The opportunity to walk back the nuclear cat, to ease the risks inherent in bloated stockpiles and staggering arsenals of weaponry is hard-won and priceless. Nuclear arms control must be at the forefront of our engagement with our former foe, both with respect to our mutual capabilities, but equally important, the potential for proliferation of expertise, fissile material, and deployable weapons.

As your year of study and growth comes to a close, I trust that you are now eager to return to the reality of the security environment I have outlined this morning. It is my fervent hope that you have assiduously prepared yourself for what awaits you. It will demand the very best you have to offer.
LB stands for Lee Butler (George Lee Butler), and AFB stands for Air Force Base. Italicized page numbers indicate photographs.

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