



# CURTIS E. LEMAY CENTER

FOR DOCTRINE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION



## VOLUME 2 LEADERSHIP

### **APPENDIX E: LEADERSHIP STUDY: OPERATIONAL COMPETENCE**

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#### **General Creech and the Transformation of Tactical Air Command (TAC)**

General Wilbur L. "Bill" Creech was the commander of TAC from 1978 to 1984. Recognizing the multiple demands associated with surviving and performing effectively in the low-altitude arena, General Creech sought an appropriate blend of technology and tactics that might help pilots return to higher altitudes where they could escape the dangers of the low-altitude regime and improve their chances of successful target attack. During earlier Red Flags, all starting scenarios each day presumed it was the first minute of the first hour of a war against undegraded Warsaw Pact air defenses. No kill removal was provided to account for surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) destroyed in previous missions, and low-level penetration to target was invariably the standard practice, on the premise that radar-guided SAMs could not be negated from higher altitudes. Not only did the resulting simulated loss rate to enemy antiaircraft artillery (AAA) and short-range infrared SAMs soar to a point where many pilots concluded that they could not survive in actual combat, the actual aircraft accident rate rose dramatically as a consequence of the unforgiving nature of the training environment. During the first two years of Red Flag, more than 30 heavily task-saturated aircrews lost their lives as a result of either having flown into the ground inadvertently while maneuvering to avoid getting locked up by a simulated threat radar or having collided in midair during a maneuvering engagement with the aggressors.

This sobering situation starkly underscored what General Creech came to call "go-low disease," motivated by his concern that the emphasis on low-altitude ingress was not only causing a needlessly high accident rate in peacetime training, but also was jeopardizing aircrew survivability and future flexibility in actual combat while, at the same time, constraining TAC's appreciation of the equipment needed to perform the ground-attack mission more effectively. In response, General Creech insisted on new tactics aimed at making defense rollback the first order of business. The emphasis instead swung to developing equipment and tactics that would enable the opening of a medium-altitude window because the most lethal Soviet SAMs could not be successfully underflown within the heart of their engagement envelopes. Aircrew proficiency at low-level operations was maintained as a fallback measure. The new focus concentrated on sanitizing the air defense environment by taking out or neutralizing enemy SAMs as a first priority, so attacking aircraft could operate more safely as soon as possible at higher altitudes beyond the lethal reach of AAA.

At the same time, General Creech eliminated the initial “core squadron” mission planning practice and instead put TAC’s air division commanders in charge of scenarios on a rotating basis. There emerged a heightened emphasis on acquiring the needed equipment that would render medium altitude tactics both possible in principle and also effective. In addition, new capabilities and tactics for operating at night were pushed hard and ultimately validated at Red Flag. Thanks to that, the character of Red Flag shifted notably toward something more closely approximating realistic large-force employment against an enemy whose defenses would eventually be degraded in actual combat. The result was more real-world training realism, as opposed to the false realism of an impenetrable enemy defense, which was finally understood in hindsight to have produced more negative than positive training.

### **Getting Serious About Electronic Warfare**

Closely connected to this stress on greater realism and greater emphasis on enemy air defense suppression was a mounting concern over the need to introduce the complexities of electronic combat into peacetime tactical training, especially those connected with coping effectively in a heavy communications jamming environment. Both during his previous assignment as the commander of the USAF’s Electronic Systems Division and later as TAC commander, General Creech figured prominently in this effort to integrate a serious program of offensive and defensive electronic combat into the Air Force’s training repertoire. In 1981, he initiated Green Flag, a Red Flag-like exercise conducted biennially at Nellis with special emphasis on electronic warfare and SAM suppression.

During the first Green Flag, General Creech directed that communications jamming be turned on at the outset and left on throughout the operation just as the Soviets would do in actual combat. As a result, 72 percent of the training sorties flown were ineffective. That ended once and for all the assumption that one could overcome enemy jamming efforts merely by manually changing radio frequencies.

### **TAC Turnaround**

Along with the major advances in aircrew training and proficiency outlined above, a largely unsung but nonetheless groundbreaking parallel improvement also took place in the organizational efficiency of TAC during the late 1970s and early 1980s under General Creech’s command. Earlier in the 1970s, upward of half of TAC’s \$25 billion inventory of aircraft were not mission-ready at any given time, and as many as 200 of its 3,800 aircraft were classified as “hangar queens”—grounded for three weeks or more due to a lack of maintenance or needed parts. Moreover, pilots who required a minimum of 20 hours of flying time a month to remain operationally ready were getting only half that amount in most cases.

TAC suffered high maintenance inefficiencies and an unacceptably high accident rate that was partly caused by them. Air Force leadership accommodated this financial crunch by raiding its operations and maintenance accounts. All of this was heavily driven by the top-down management style that had come to afflict the entire US defense establishment as a result of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s dogma of

centralization from the business world which, by the end of the Vietnam war, had pervaded almost all walks of American military life.

Among the many pernicious results of this affliction was a mounting lapse in integrity at the operational level, in which small lies about unit performance became ever larger sins of self-deception which ultimately undermined both mission readiness and safety. Driven by a perceived need to worship statistics for their own sake rather than the underlying facts they were supposed to represent and by a bureaucracy which insisted on hearing the “right” answers irrespective of reality, USAF aircrews would falsify their mission reports to show they had performed events such as inflight refuelings and weapons deliveries which they had in fact not conducted. Thanks to the same felt compulsion, unit supervisors would record takeoffs which had been delayed by maintenance as “on time” and assign aircraft to the flight schedule which had not been properly released by maintenance control. In sum, bureaucratic gridlock and an overlay of regulations and statistical imperatives, aggravated by diminished funds, had come to stifle morale and to discourage initiative and innovation at the command’s grass-roots level.

With the strong backing of Air Force Chief of Staff General David Jones, General Creech quickly sized up the situation and proceeded to invert the traditional top-down centralization of TAC by imposing a strict bottom-up approach to the organization and management of his command, in the process forcing authority and responsibility down to its very lowest reaches. At the same time, he introduced a radically new and different tone by replacing the former pattern of leadership intimidation and bluster with what he called “reasoned command.” The new watchword became management through motivation rather than regulation, on the premise that professionals will willingly assume greater responsibility when they are treated with dignity and given a sense of personal ownership of their contribution to the larger whole.

General Creech’s leadership philosophy was based on a recognition that loyalty was a two-way street and on the premise that if a commander always looked up to those at the front, he would never talk down to them. It was profoundly intolerant of centrocraic practices and recognized an organization can only be as successful as those at the bottom are willing to make it. Toward that end, General Creech emphasized focusing more on the product than on the process. He sought to minimize excess regulation, which he believed merely depressed the spirit and stifled motivation. He also sought to replace inhibitions on communication with full openness, and he shifted his headquarters function from restricting to facilitating. Above all, he constantly stressed that there were no poor units, only poor leaders.

General Creech insisted that a mistake was not a crime and a crime was not a mistake, and he incessantly played up the importance of honoring the difference between the two in meting out discipline for mishaps and lesser oversights. His abiding goal was to infuse the system with trust and respect so coherence and control might be maintained through incentive rather than through top-down authoritarianism. He sought to instill throughout the ranks an appreciation of the crucial difference between quality *control* and quality *creation* and to focus predominantly on the latter, which demanded both different language and a different mindset. To achieve it, he strove to inhibit excess micromanagement of inputs from above. He also spotlighted pride, a quality that

needed creating and sustaining by empowering those at the working level to show initiative, while providing for responsibility and accountability at every level.

As General Creech later explained it, “the villain wasn’t any particular person, but the whole system.” By systematically pushing decisions down to the level of those front-line supervisors who actually carried them out, the risk of poor decisions was sharply reduced. General Creech personally played a lead role in selecting, mentoring, and grooming those at the working level who showed the greatest promise for future leadership, motivated by his credo that the cardinal imperative of a leader is to produce more leaders. His four simple “pass/fail” standards of conduct expected of all subordinate TAC leaders entailed a staunch refusal to countenance any manifestations of lying, displays of temper, abuse of position, or lapses in integrity.

The payoff of this turnaround in the TAC culture soon became widely apparent. Time came to be used more efficiently, quality in all domains of command activity went up, and excellence became a TAC-wide fixation. Units became competitive in all major areas of endeavor, particularly in maintenance delivery and flight operations. Unit commanders were encouraged to fly more often and to lead from the front. All of this generated measurable improvements in all major categories of performance with no more aircraft, personnel, or money than TAC had when General Creech first assumed command. He narrowed the gap in trust between TAC’s leaders and led, installed a system based on mutual respect and mutual support, and instilled a quality mindset at every level, basing the product (TAC’s organizational efficiency and mission readiness) on persuasion rather than ex cathedra orders. The ensuing effect of reducing the number of TAC’s aircraft that were down for maintenance at any given moment by three-fourths yielded an inventory availability and increase in combat capability from existing assets that would have cost more than \$12 billion had they been purchased anew.

These reforms eventually permeated all elements of TAC down to the lowest front-line operators, in the process fundamentally changing their former roles, relationships, and responsibilities by enhancing the creativity and commitment of those who ultimately determined the command’s success. The impact of the reforms on TAC’s morale quotient was palpable. TAC’s first-term reenlistment rate increased by 136 percent, a resounding vote of approval for the new, decentralized, and team-based approach to management. Other early returns included a substantial increase in available flying hours for aircrews, better quality of aircraft maintenance, and a sharp increase in TAC’s overall mission readiness rates.

### **Impact of “Robusting”**

In a significant departure from previous resource management practice which he called unit “robusting,” General Creech dramatically increased the combat capability of TAC’s wings simply by applying a new organizing principle. Instead of sharing shortages across all three squadrons in a given wing, as had been the previous practice, General Creech took the existing assets of a wing (both assigned aircrews and aircraft) and built up two of the three squadrons to full strength rather than spreading the pain equally among all three.

The corrective measures instituted by General Creech in 1978, with full Air Staff support, established explicit criteria for “robust” units, namely, those that were manned and equipped at a level that made them ready to meet their wartime tasking. The advantages of this new approach included greater honesty in unit status reporting by highlighting rather than hiding shortages and by sharing a wing’s strengths rather than its weaknesses. Robusting made TAC’s wings better organized for prompt deployment to meet wartime obligations by preventing the suboptimization of key assets and by putting pressure where it belonged, namely, on resource suppliers so that unit tasking would be more in line with actually available resources.

In all, these reforms lent a sharper focus to authority and accountability and got unit-level peer pressure working in positive rather than negative directions. They also drove authority, accountability, and a sense of ownership to the lowest possible levels throughout TAC, giving everyone in the system both pride of involvement and a personal stake in the product. In short order, TAC went from a vertically- to a horizontally-organized command. Each squadron became responsible for its own 24 assigned aircraft, with all disciplines working together in small teams within the squadron to get the job done. Along the way, paperwork was reduced by 65 percent, and the average time required to deliver a needed part was lowered from three and a half hours to eight minutes. The net result was a genuine personalizing of a once-impersonal system, as well as a doubling of the number of peacetime training sorties flown during a given training period with no increase in operating cost.

In an enduring legacy of the TAC turnaround, this transformation in management style and organizational efficiency instituted during General Creech’s tenure later swept the rest of the Air Force. The team-based, decentralized approach to management flowed from the premise that desired accomplishments are achieved by individuals and small collectives working as teams.

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