



Career highlights: from left, pistol-packing Gen. LeMay at a World War II Airlift; LeMay (in flight togs) while head of SAC; and LeMay and the Chief of Staff of the Army, Navy, and Marines at recent test-ban-treaty hearings

**P**UFFING FURIOUSLY on his ever-present cigar, General Curtis LeMay, granite-jawed chief of the U. S. Air Force, arrived at an air base to inspect a new bomber. As he strode toward the plane, a cautious officer warned, "Sir, if you board her with that lighted cigar, she might blow up." The base commander, knowing his visitor, told the other officer, "Don't worry. She wouldn't dare."

Airmen call General LeMay "Old Iron Pants." In Moscow and Peiping, they call him even less complimentary names. "It was LeMay's drive and prowess that for 10 years made the Strategic Air Force the dominant chess piece on the board of world power," says the highly respected newsman, Theodore H. White.

"And behind SAC's shield, McNamara (Secretary of Defense) and Taylor (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs) have finally been able to redeploy the strength of America," he adds.

LeMay's amazing results spring from many sources. One is the ordeal known as "having tea with LeMay." When a commander's performance skids below perfection, LeMay summons him to a closed-door meeting. Nobody knows what happens, but witnesses swear they have seen star-spangled generals stagger out to the nearest ice-water cooler to apply cold compresses to their temples. And thereafter, their performance always seems to improve miraculously.

The LeMay presence is unique. He is neither a "yes" man nor a "no" man. He is a grunter. He does not smile, finding nothing in his office sufficiently sunny. His gestures are flicks of both hands upward and outward. Unbuttoned of blouse, unyielding of eye, he disposes of problems like a well-oiled machine—and with the same warmth. Subordinates regulate their interviews by the tilt of his cigar.

But the General is no one-sided misanthrope. A woman associate says, "I've never heard him laugh, but I think he's all mush inside." A friend who accompanied him to memorial services at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier says, "I saw tears running down his cheeks."

His wife recalls, "When he finally came home after three years overseas during World War II, he stood shivering on the front steps with our

daughter Janie all one wintry afternoon—so she could prove to the other kids in the block that she really did have a father!"

When he installed hobby shops throughout the Strategic Air Command, LeMay became a part-time patron. One night, he and another general, wearing coveralls, were dismantling a motor when an airman second class came along, pushing his stalled jalopy. He called for help, but the officers didn't hear him. The boy came closer and yelled, "Fellows, for gosh sake, how about giving me a hand?" Obediently, the "fellows" put down their tools and pushed the car into the shop. That airman still doesn't know that he was giving orders to SAC's commander-in-chief.

Several homey facts should be added to his portrait. LeMay goes on diets and falls off like other mortals. Nevertheless, he has lost 14 pounds in the last year. He and his wife exercise daily.

Off duty, he is an inveterate hobbyist. His delight in speed is profound. He has owned three Allard racers, and his best civilian friends include two part-time jet pilots, tv star Arthur Godfrey and Sen. Barry Goldwater. When he got a motor scooter recently, he put his wife on the seat behind him and rocketed around the block, grinning like a kid with a toy fire engine.

As an antidote to office pressure, he puts things together, tears them apart, and learns new skills. Trying to master an electric organ, he became unhappy with his progress, so he cut the letters A,B,C,D,E,F,G out of newspaper headlines and glued them to the correct keys. "Now, a half-wit can play it." He insists. "Even with my tin ear, I can manage 'Old Black Joe,' 'Home on the Range,'—that sort of thing."

#### No Margin for Error Allowed

What is the essential quality that undergirds LeMay's thoughts and actions? Probably it is the habit of innovating to achieve perfection. His wife became sharply aware of his strong desire for perfection when he went overseas during the war. Casually he promised to write every day. And he did—365 days a year every year while he was away!

His daughter recalls his reaction when she showed him her grades from Stephens College, all B's and B plusses. He stormed, "You should have made straight A's."

When World War II found the country with no combat-ready bomber squadrons, young LeMay, who was a specialist in navigation, was

hustled to a desert training command. His men could fly like fools, but once off in the blue they couldn't find their way home. He ordered constant practice, leading them through aching day and night flights. On the ground, he held them in their cockpits, simulating long-distance sorties. "The first requirement for combat readiness is a calloused butt," he said. By the time his B-17 squadron was ready for Europe, he bore the unshakable name of "Old Iron Pants."

Over the German heartland, he learned that Nazi planes could easily kill off the trailers in his V-flight pattern. Flying experimental missions with his 305th Bombardment Group, he devised a novel diamond formation which discouraged attack.

#### How to Become a General

But it became clear that the war could not be won with German fighters filling the sky. So LeMay decided that the factories that built the fighters must be knocked out. The trouble was that the factory site was Regensburg, Bavaria, a city so distant that B-17's could not carry enough gasoline to fly there and back. LeMay studied his maps, assembled his veterans, and led them on an unprecedented flight. German experts who followed his penetration concluded that it was a suicide mission, and Göring sent up every available fighter to deflect it.

Colonel LeMay fought his way through them and dropped tons of high explosives on the Messerschmitt factories. Then, instead of flying back to England, he flew straight south across Italy to American bases in North Africa. He had lost 24 bombers but had knocked out 60 enemy planes, and the assembly plant at Regensburg was in ruins. Thus, the technique of "shuttle bombing" was born. Two weeks later he was a general.

Ordered to the Pacific to take command of B-29 fleets, he devised new tactics again. The result was a stunning attack on Tokyo by 335 Superfortresses. Of it, Gen. Thomas S. Powers says, "The March 9, 1945, bomb raid was the greatest single disaster in military history. It caused damage greater than the combined destruction of the atomic-bomb drops on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There were more casualties than in any other military action in the history of the world."

The end of the hot war brought new problems. Soon after taking command of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, LeMay saw the Berlin situation explode and Communist troops seal off the city.