

## **ML.77.Two Commands, One Colonel**

This is the true story of a SAC Colonel who simultaneously commanded two SAC Wings in two different SAC numbered Air Forces (8th AF and 15th AF), unintended but nevertheless documented.

I was the Commander of the 301st AREFWG (SAC) at Rickenbacker AFB, Columbus, OH one of the many wings in 8th Air Force with HQ at Barksdale AFB. LA when in March 1978 my secretary advised me that I had a call from an old and dear friend from Offutt, Bill Klausner.

I took the call and Bill in his very, very deep voice, after we exchanged pleasantries, advised me there was a rumor circulating Offutt I was to be the next 55th SRW Commander. (The 55th SRW was in 15th Air Force Headquartered at March AFB, CA.) He also advised me in all sincerity to 'decline' the assignment for reasons those then assigned to the 55th might share today. He reiterated his advice/counsel several times indicating the reasons for this very unusual suggested 'declination' to command a SAC Wing, which I suggest then was the goal of every SAC Colonel.

After his many repeated warnings about accepting the assignment, I finally shared with him my analysis of this information and suggestion. First, I said, having the opportunity to command any SAC Wing was very competitive and the opportunity to Command two extremely unusual. He insisted it was 'in-the-cards' and reliable information, again advising me against accepting the assignment.

I then shared my philosophy of Command: at any level in any organization, command was the epitome of an officer's career be it command of a trash collection squadron or a SAC Wing. Command gave us the opportunity to make a difference at any level. And oh, by the way, this never will happen. One Wing Command position in SAC is treasured, two Wing Commands would never happen. "Reg" he said, "you're coming to the 55th, don't take the assignment". We ended the conversation and I forgot about it. Again, this was in March.

Fast forward to May and my secretary advised me I had a call from Lt Gen Dick Lawson, 8th AF Commander at Barksdale. I returned to the office and sat down at my desk and answered, expecting the normal protocol of speaking to the General's exec or secretary who, in turn, would hand me over to the General. WRONG! Gen Lawson was on the phone waiting for me, just one of his traits of leadership demonstrating his respect for his subordinates. (A lesson.)

After the pleasantries of "how's your Mother," etc. (he and his wife had visited us at Rickenbacker previously and met her) he asked me if I was "sitting down," this after we had failed a CEVG visit and I had slow-rolled a Mustang down his runway at Barksdale – twice – after one of his 8th AF Commander's Conferences, while he was watching on the ramp. I waited for the shoe to drop and exile to the boondocks. "Yes sir", I said and he said "congratulations, you're going to Offutt to command the 55<sup>th</sup>." I, very much relieved, said "well thank you sir, I appreciate your trust and confidence." Then I asked "when would you like me to be there?" He responded, "yesterday."

Now we at Rickenbacker had scheduled a major open house at the end of May and CINCSAC, General Ellis, had also scheduled a SAC all senior officer (Numbered AF Commanders – three-star General officers, Division Commanders – one stars, and of course all SAC Wing Commanders – Colonels) conference at the end of May.

General Lawson and I discussed this and he 'suggested' since the 15th AF Commander and I, gaining command, would be there we should schedule the change of Command on the Friday ending the Conference.

I proceeded to the Conference in the capacity of 301st AREFWG Commander, 8th Air Force and at the designated time (Friday morning) and the designated place (Mod 'A'). All personnel involved in this ceremony convened including the entire Wing assembled in formation.

The parties involved – the then current, outgoing 55th Commander, the Wing Senior Enlisted Advisor bearing the 55th Flag, and Lt Gen Shotz – mounted the trailer bed prepared for this, as it turned out, very historic, previously undocumented, and impossible situation to take place. After the orders were published and the incumbent surrendered the flag and stepped aside, I moved into position, saluted and uttered those wonderful words, "Sir, I assume command," was given the flag, and instantly commanded a wing in both 8th AF and 15AF.

I turned to my new – and second – vice-commander (I had one at Rickenbacker as well), handed him the brick and said "you got it. I'll be at Rickenbacker for my change of command there and back here in two weeks."

I returned to Rickenbacker for a marvelous COC ceremony with an unexpected, and surreptitiously choreographed, surprise flyover by the USAF Thunderbirds as Lt Gen Lawson, 8th AF Commander, relieved me of command while the entire Wing passed in review on the ramp, including the SPs with their dogs in the last formation so no one might step in dog "s---" should they decide to dump. Marvelous it was. Hollywood would have been proud! One of the gals in a previous squadron passing in review lost her shoe and the shoe made the front page of the Columbus Dispatch. (I still have a copy.)

When 8th AF and 15th discovered what happened I was asked not to discuss it as it was an 'anomaly' (FUBAR) and never should have happened. But that's the way it was. The OSI investigation following resulted from an anonymous call to the AF IG alleging mis-use of government aircraft (C-123) for personal use and the second of my three Letters of Counselling.

- *Reg Urschler*