

Brief History of the Corona (Commanders) Conferences*

- The first recorded U.S. Army Air Forces (AAF) commanding generals meeting for three and four-star generals was held at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, by Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold from 18-20 February 1944. The theme of the conference was "streamlining. . . to improve efficiency, eliminating weak command personnel, and an examination of the post-war goals of the Air Force." There were 157 seats, suggesting that the generals brought along their staffs. [HQ, AAF Flying Training Command brochure, 18-20 Feb 1944.] General Arnold also chaired conferences held on 14 March and 19 November 1946 at the Pentagon.
- General Carl A. Spaatz held the next commanders' conference in Washington, D.C., on 20 March 1947. Spaatz became the first Chief of Staff of the USAF on September 26, 1947. Another such commanders' meeting was recorded on 6-8 December 1948. On 22 January 1951, another commanders' conference was held at the Pentagon. Some retired USAF generals believe that commanders conferences were held annually thereafter,
- The first recorded "Southern" commanders meeting was held at Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico, on 17-19 January 1955.
- In the late 1950s-early 1960s, officials of the Royal Canadian Air Force began to attend some meetings at the conferences.
- When Gen. Curtis E. LeMay became the fifth Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force on 30 June 1961, he emphasized the importance of units under his command to functioning as a close-knit team to successfully meet new challenges. General LeMay planned to utilize leadership skills he had gained from his World War II and SAC experience to inspire and motivate them. Demonstrating his characteristically aggressive and highly personalized leadership style and continuing a SAC tradition that he had started, General LeMay called for his MAJCOM commanders to meet in a combined strategic planning and commanders' conference/dinner. To foster greater unity, cohesion, and teamwork, LeMay planned to sit not at the table's head,

which was customary, but in the center of the table in the midst of his top lieutenants. This table had been built of great length according to the general's specifications and by linking one table to another. At the start of the meeting, General LeMay directed that this massive and heavy table, nearly 100 feet long, be moved closer to the windows. This task required precision, unity, and coordination among all MAJCOM commanders. As General LeMay had planned, an invaluable lesson had been learned by this simple exercise: a seemingly impossible task had been successfully completed by close teamwork. To further reinforce this lesson of the importance of working together as a team and that anything could be accomplished if "all worked together and achieved the same result without sacrifice of time, resources, or casualties," General LeMay ordered the table to be moved back to its original location. General LeMay also emphasized the central lessons learned by stating how: "Success comes in CANS, not in CANNOTS" and "By moving the multiple tables comprising this conference table, first to the window and then back to the middle of the room, each one of you had a chance to do both. And your efforts are proof positive it is doable as long as no one loses sight of the goal." Then, General LeMay continued to build a sense of team spirit, when he passed out fine cigars that were his favorite—the Corona—to each commander, along with fine brandy.

- In this way, the tradition of the Corona Event was born out of the first strategic planning meeting/dinner and commanders' conference of Chief of Staff LeMay in a formal dining setting: the genesis of the Corona Top Heraldic Dinner. The tradition of the Corona Top Heraldic Dinner helped to instill a new spirit of teamwork, cohesion, and unity of purpose that helped the USAF to meet the challenges of both the Cold War and the Vietnam War. The first official Corona Top Heraldic Dinner was held within only a few months after General LeMay became Chief of Staff on 30 June 1961 at Ft. Myer, Virginia. This was held either in September or October of 1961. While other top generals' conferences were held on an irregular basis before 1961, it was General LeMay who established them on a regular basis.
- Those in attendance at the first Corona were the MAJCOM commanders and some of their subordinates, which evidently did not

include the vice commanders. While the number of attendees at the first Corona Top Heraldic Dinner was a relatively small number, today's Corona Top Heraldic Dinners/Conferences have grown considerably, including attendance by some 50 principal leaders. This increase in the number of participants reflects the increase in the complexity of AF issues, according to General Thomas S. Moorman, Jr., USAF (Ret.), "the issues became so vast and inter-related and pertaining to joint matters" that more participation of Air Force entities was absolutely required. Whereas in the early Corona conferences, the Chief of Staff would tend to disseminate information and decisions, as time went on there was an obvious need for more discussion by the commanders and the Air Staff. This increasing number of participants also reflected what General W. Y. Smith termed "the democratization of Coronas" in the necessity of getting more people involved because of the increasing complexity of policy and operational issues.

- According to some retired general officers, the first Senior Statesmen Conference was held in 1966. In this forum, the retired four-stars are briefed on the Air Force's major developments and issues. Their comments on these themes are duly noted by the Air Force's leaders. During the fall of 1966, the first commanders meeting at the U.S. Air Force Academy was held
- Continuing a tradition from the first Corona, the topics of discussion have centered in part on the initiatives of each new presidential administration. For instance, at the Corona South in 1986 in part focused on the role of the USAF in drug traffic interdiction. And today, such Corona discussions include the war on terrorism. But as from the beginning with General LeMay's first Corona meeting and as emphasized in the Corona South 1986 meeting, the primary considerations continued to focus on "the important issues facing the Air Force Commanders today."
- The first commanders conference to be called "Corona" was held at Andrew AFB, Md. Hosted by Gen. John D. Ryan, Corona Top used the standard nickname for AF projects.

- On 7-10 February 1973, Corona Salt [South?] — Palm Tree was held at Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico. Corona South was relocated to Homestead AFB, Florida, in the early 1970s.
- In the fall of 1977, the name Corona West first appeared at the meeting at the USAF Academy, Colorado Springs.
- From the beginning and until today, a primary focus of these Corona Conferences also continued to be that of initiating the new directives of the Secretary of the Air Force. For instance, at the 1986 Corona South conference, the Chief of Staff, General Charles Gabriel, "described the new Secretary of the Air Force [Russell Rourke] as a person who studies the issues hard, uses his staff well, articulates the Air Force position accurately as well as aggressively . . . " This statement suggests that the Secretary was not in attendance, unlike today. [An "educated guess" is that Secretary Verne Orr was the first attendee.]
- At Corona Top 1986, the Chief of Staff "opened the conference with a brief personal recap of major accomplishments of the past four years and his view of current issues. The new Secretary of the Air Force provided a short preview of his management philosophy, then opened with a free flowing discussion enabling each of the conferees to bring issues to his attention." Indeed, General LeMay had formalized the Corona conferences in 1961 to encourage discussions with his top lieutenants to help in formulating his strategic plan for the Air Force.
- The process by which "each of the conferees [now] bring issues" to the attention of the Chief of Staff remains informal. At the heraldic dinner at the conference, each commander delivers a prepared presentation, emphasizing the past, present, and future goals and concerns of their respective commands. They also describe the historical significance and meaning of their command's distinctive heraldry. [One researcher, Captain Angela Smith, wrote how the central "elements of the Heraldic Dinner have evolved over the years."]

- With the passage of time, the Corona meetings have become more comprehensive in scope by focusing on global concerns. The Secretary of the AF has become a regular attendee. Indicating the evolving significance of Corona, Chief of Staff General Ronald R. Fogelman described the October 18, 1996 Corona meeting of the previous week: "Air Force leaders met to develop a strategic vision for the first quarter of the 21st century. During our discussions, we addressed a wide range of issues—from alternative futures, emerging threats, national security objectives, Joint Vision 2010, and air and space capabilities [and most important] these meetings . . . are vital [and] in my view, it is crucial that we make this effort. The world has changed too much for us to stay static and the Air Force has a responsibility to change in order to meet the needs of the nation." General Fogleman's words emphasized the strategic and geopolitical importance of the discussions and decision-making at Corona. One product of the meeting was the document, Into the 21st Century: A Strategic Vision for the Air Force, which set out the basic guidelines and principles for preparing the future.

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