

**Gen. Curtis Emerson LeMay**  
June 30, 1961–January 31, 1965



*Portrait by Sandor Klein*



**C**URTIS EMERSON LeMAY was born in Columbus, Ohio, on November 15, 1906. He recalled being happiest as a child when prowling the countryside with a gun and bowie knife. The son of an ironworker, LeMay worked in a foundry at night so he could attend Ohio State University.

After receiving a reserve commission in the Army field artillery in 1928, he left school to enter flight training at Kelly Field, Texas. When he received his pilot's wings, he transferred to the Air Corps and obtained a regular commission in January 1930. Two years later he received his bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Ohio State.

Lieutenant LeMay's first tour of duty was with the 27th Pursuit Squadron at Selfridge Field, Michigan. He served in various assignments in fighter operations before he transferred to bomber aircraft in 1937 as a member of the 2d Bomb Group at Langley Field, Virginia. In 1937 and 1938 he was the lead navigator on two mass flights of B-17 Flying Fortresses to South America. The group received the Mackay Trophy in 1938 for that outstanding aerial achievement, the first such mass flight in history. Prior to the U.S. entry into World War II, LeMay pioneered air routes over the South Atlantic to Africa and over the North Atlantic to England. He was promoted to major in 1941, to lieutenant colonel in January 1942, and to colonel in March 1942.

After he was named commanding officer of the 305th Bombardment Group, LeMay trained it in California and then led it and its B-17 Flying Fortress bombers to Europe and into combat. One of his most famous acts of the war occurred when he ordered his men to stop taking evasive maneuvers while over the target. He doubted that such maneuvers did any good and was sure they threw off bombing accuracy. With his cigar firmly in place, he personally led the next raid, coming in straight and level through heavy antiaircraft fire to strike at the submarine pens at St. Nazaire. The flight became legendary. LeMay pioneered battle formations of B-17s to provide better defensive power against enemy fighters. He took command of the 3d Bombardment Division and led a famous shuttle mission in August 1943 during which bombers took off from bases in England, struck deep into Germany against the Messerschmitt plant at Regensburg, and landed in North Africa. Although promoted to brigadier general a month later, he never lost the ability to identify with enlisted men. During World War II, he

amended a series of seemingly endless Allied Command memos forbidding fights between U.S. and British servicemen by noting that he endorsed the order and he wanted it known that if his men did fight, they were to win.

In July 1944 LeMay was transferred to the Pacific to direct the B-29 heavy bombardment operations of the XX Bomber Command in the China-Burma-India theater. He later commanded the XXI Bomber Command with headquarters on Guam and still later became chief of staff of the Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific. On March 9, 1945, he shifted the tactics of the bomber force from high-altitude precision attacks to low-altitude nighttime operations using incendiary bombs. A formation of more than three hundred B-29s set Tokyo ablaze, and other firebombing strikes followed. Preparations for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki took place under his command, but LeMay had predicted that the firebombing would destroy every worthwhile target in Japan by November 1945 and that the atomic strikes would not be necessary. At the conclusion of World War II, he returned to the United States piloting a B-29 Superfortress on a nonstop, record-making flight from Hokkaido, Japan, to Chicago, Illinois.

In December 1945 LeMay became deputy chief of air staff for research and development. In October 1947 he was chosen to command the U.S. Air Forces in Europe, with headquarters at Wiesbaden, Germany. He organized air operations for the famous Berlin Airlift—a remarkable exhibition of logistical air power that impressed the world and left the Soviets utterly defeated in their attempt to starve West Berlin into submission. General LeMay was a more-than-occasional pilot during the airlift, claiming that he had to be in Berlin “for a conference” and saying he might as well fly a much-needed transport rather than travel as a VIP passenger.

In 1946 LeMay was named commanding general of Strategic Air Command (SAC), and over the nearly ten years that he held the position, he built the organization into a global striking force that was the most efficient and feared nuclear arm of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, he made SAC into a proud elite force that kept waves of nuclear-armed bombers aloft twenty-four hours a day. He perfected aerial refueling and boasted a force that with nearly twenty bases worldwide was ready to strike anywhere at any time. One of the many legendary stories about General LeMay was that he once found a SAC sentry who had put down his weapon to eat a sandwich. “This afternoon I found a man guarding a hangar with a ham sandwich. There will be no more of that,” he raged in a memo. Yet he was known also for his concern for the physical well-being and comfort of his men. He was as demanding of the brass as he was of his pilots and men and was known as a general who would not order his men to do something he would not do himself.

In July 1957 General LeMay returned to Washington as vice chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force under Gen. Thomas D. White. LeMay became chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force in July 1961, and in that role he tangled with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara over plans to cut back on manned bombers for ballistic missiles. McNamara had denied LeMay the B-70

bomber—which the general wanted as the successor to the B-52—and forced him to accept the F-111 fighter-bomber. General LeMay also disagreed with McNamara's restraints on U.S. air power in Vietnam, a sore point for a former combat pilot who believed in and had fought in all-out war. After LeMay retired he announced that McNamara's plans "may be signaling the end of the country."

Although he was a bomber advocate, LeMay supported an Air Force presence in space, maintaining that "no nation can afford to allow an enemy one-sided exploitation of space, or any other medium for communications and observation in wartime. If one of two opponents possesses military capabilities relative to space, and the other does not, there can well be one-sided military exploitation of space in wartime. . . ." He added that the military implications of space were more dangerous and even more revolutionary than were those that accompanied the evolution of the airplane. "For our own safety," he said, "we must take the lead and remain in the forefront of whatever developments may come."

After retirement, LeMay served as board chairman of a Los Angeles electronics firm but was fired for his active support of George Wallace's bid to become the American Independent Party's candidate for president in 1968. LeMay later accepted Wallace's invitation to become his vice presidential running mate. General LeMay frequently expressed strong anticommunist views, in keeping with a basic conservative temperament. "I don't believe there are good Communists and bad Communists," the general said. "I just think they are Communists and they all have the same basic principles involved which I think are basically wrong." This architect of strategic air power died of a heart attack in a California military hospital on October 1, 1990.