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Omaha & SAC: Peace...it's our profession (1982)

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10. OMAHA & SAC

December 14, 1981, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—Being airborne to Kansas one week and Nebraska the next takes its toll. It's exhausting. There I am in Omaha in a Sheraton hotel on the outskirts of town in mid-December with 30 Resale marketing guys from Nebraska and the Dakotas for 36 hours, not leaving the building once, and, boy, was it good to get back home, if only to realize it later than sooner. I like Kansas better on the travel tour. I've been there more often, and thus it's familiar and more comfortable. Nebraska is a very different thing. Same as Kansas, only farther north, colder, more rural.

The ads on TV weren't for dish soap or deodorant. They were for herbicides useful for controlling weeds in your cornfield. They had a special news show about agricultural news and prices, early and late, called Ag Report. All the latest in soybean prices and hog and beef futures. In Nebraska, the slam against an Iowan is to call them bib whistlers. Huh? I asked a guy from the Dakotas, whose home state of North Dakota is reputed to have as its state tree the telephone pole.

"Yeah," he said, "they put their thumbs in their bib overalls like this" (at which point he makes like his thumbs are under his bib) "and they whistle like this." He proceeds to whistle like some Iowa hayseed.

They used to call Nebraska the Great American Desert, because some early mapmaker wrote it down that way. He probably had to put something down on all that space between St. Louis and San Francisco. When the Oregon Trail got started, following the fur trapping Mountain Men, folks got the idea that the expanse west of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Arkansas rivers wasn't a desert at all. It was something much different, the prairie. Vast, vast, hot and cold, wildlife all over, sky everywhere, and storms you can write home about every week for a lifetime and never run out.



January 21, 1982, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—I got out of Chicago at 7:20 a.m. Tuesday on a United flight. After landing I rented a four-wheel drive AMC Eagle and drove to the Strategic Air Command headquarters in Bellevue, Nebraska, south of Omaha, arriving about 10:20

a.m., drove up to the gate and asked the guard what I should do to get inside without getting shot as a spy. The guard saluted like his life depended on it, a mechanical movement identical to the last and the next—a clipped flip of the forearm and wrist that made me think that all this guy did in his spare time was stand in front of a mirror to perfect his saluting technique.

His manner of speech was: “Sir, okay...okay...okay...Sir...okay.” A cadence of talking that reminded me of a wind-up doll that didn’t realize what it sounded like. His dress was impressive: beret, ascot, and black leather flight jacket, with his name stenciled on a black leather patch sewn on the breast. At his waist was slung a leather holster, with a .45-caliber automatic. His leggings were snow white, winter military issue, boots with a canvas/nylon gizmo that went over his pants up to his calves. This guy looked like the real thing, which of course he was. His eyes were blue, hair blond, close cropped to the side of his head. I was sent to another gate, where I saw a carbon copy guard except for the black hair. Other guards I saw that day were the same as these guys. All business.

I was met by Capt. Al Miller, 30, an eight-year public affairs officer (PAO), who I later learned was within five months of separation from the service, frustrated with his career choice and the lack of creativity in his job. I followed him up to his office in the SAC HQ, where 3,000 SAC bureaucrats work. This is SAC’s Fairfax. SAC is a designated command, which reports directly to the Joint Chiefs and the DOD, not to the Air Force Department. There are other commands like that, I learned, outside the normal service bureaucracy.

Miller took me to the Public Affairs office, which has about 33 men and women, all but one Air Force. It’s a combined employee relations/public relations shop, putting out employee communication stuff, a base newspaper, and bulletin board messages, as well as helping to write and edit speeches for Gen. Bennie Davis, the SAC commander, and handling other communications chores. The unit is run by Col. Mike McIntyre.

The occasion was the fourth annual SAC Public Affairs Officers’ Conference. I was invited to give a speech and take part in the conference. They brought in the PAOs from SAC bases around the world, say about 280, plus affiliated bases of other air forces of varying flags. They talk with the press and are, in effect, advisors to their wing commanders. The job is just like mine.

I had coffee and a chat with a Lt. Col. Ed McNeil, a 20-year man in his late 40s. He’d been a Marine after high school, went civilian in college and took Army ROTC, went to grad school, joined the Air Force Reserve, and then worked as a reporter for an Illinois radio station and newspaper. He decided he didn’t like it and asked for active duty. He’s lived all over the world, loved China and Taiwan, thinks, probably correctly, that his children

are more cosmopolitan than any others in Omaha, and is fluent in Mandarin. He was very curious about the civilian outside world, business PR, and the like. But realistic. He was a poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks in Omaha, who grew up to see the world.

McNeil laughed about the Marines. “I mean, they call you a shitbird for so long, you believe it. Then they tell you you’re a Marine, and you believe it. When I got out all I did was fight people. I mean, somebody’d say something crosswise with me and I’d paste him. It wasn’t until I was in my mid-20s that I realized what they had done to me. All Marines want to do is go find some swabbies and kick the shit out of them.”

McNeil said that was about a thousand years ago. I told him that every Marine I’d ever met (I was thinking particularly of my buddy at the Joliet refinery with the Donald Duck tattoo) was always a Marine. “Yeah, but you got to be careful. There are no ex-Marines. Only former marines.”

After my chat, I was taken to the auditorium where the conference was being held. Brig Gen. Elmer Stream was talking about what a wing commander expected of a PAO. Just like a PAO at Mobil. Unbelievable. Stream is a bona fide piece of work, very high-profile, former SAC wing commander in Wichita, now a Pentagon planning staffer assigned to international agreements. Had lunch with him later. He was smooth and polished. Very impressive. He was a black guy; his subordinates were color blind. After he spoke, he asked for questions, which were always preceded with a “Sir...”

When he left the podium, all assembled stood, and when the general left, he simply said, “As you were.”

After that little exchange, I was stunned that everything I was hearing about the PAO job, the role of the wing commander, etc., was just like here. The stylized way these guys treated each other, saluting all the time, and Boss, Sir, Colonel, etc.

I thought that Mobil couldn’t be more like that Air Force base if somebody had planned it that way, which they may in fact have done. I read in Peter Drucker’s story about General Motors, the 1947 book you told me to read called *Concept of the Corporation*, that the modern corporation designed by Albert Sloan of GM in the late ’20s and ’30s was modeled after the military, which derived its organizational structure from the Prussian organization of a few centuries ago. Staff versus line. Reporting channels, etc. I’m sure McKinsey, which helped put together the modern Mobil in the late 1950s, used all this as the guidebook. Can’t get over it, still. In fact, the joke there was how similar the corporation and the military were. Me in my three-piece blue, them in their uniforms. Professional demeanor, work relationships with colleagues, with support and superiors, job responsibilities, etc., it’s the same as theirs. The difference, of course, was the mission of our organizations. Those differed plenty.

As I mentioned, there was a lunch at the officers club with the general and other bigs on the base. The conversation was intelligent, restrained, like a meeting among the big marketers here when a senior manager comes to town. Everyone is watching his ass.

Another general, Richard Cane, a pilot and general all-around military jock, came in late. He's director of public affairs in the Office of the Air Force secretary. About mid-40s, native of Akron, a graduate of St. Ignatius, a jock Mick school, University of Detroit, Air Force ROTC, served in various active AF positions, mostly staff bureaucracy, AF Academy director of public information, Pentagon and the Georgetown mill. His last job was the congressional liaison officer for the AF chief of staff.

"Quite an education, I can tell you," he would say later, "I never had an idea that the world worked that way before."

He said it as though he'd been face to face with the elephant, the knowledge that things work differently than he had thought when he constructed his life's ideas. It was clear that his current job wasn't nearly as interesting or challenging as the Congress job. He was very courteous to me, and full of chat later. After lunch Capt. Miller gave me a tour of the base. By the way, I was never left alone. Col. McNeil, Col. McIntyre, or Capt. Miller was always with me. I had to wear a yellow V-badge—No. 118, which I had to memorize. I had to pass checkpoints about every 100 feet, past one of those guards I told you about.

When I went into the auditorium, I had to actually leave the badge with the SP/Elite (Security Patrol-Elite) an Airman NCO, one of the many who act like their job is a premier assignment. They all have those berets, ascots, and .45-caliber sidearms. All have the glare that isn't funny. Because I had relinquished the badge, I couldn't leave the auditorium area without an escort, even if I wanted to. All very subtle. Never explicit. But I was a civilian—a foreigner.

On this tour I saw the airplanes everybody hears about but sees only in DOD films.

"Over there you can see a B-52...and over there is a Looking Glass, one of those is airborne at all times, with a general officer who is able to assume command of all SAC forces in case of nuclear attack. The Underground Command Post here isn't secure against a blast, and if we are attacked we can command war from that plane...Over there is an E-4a which could be used by the president and joint chiefs and cabinet secretaries in case of war to ensure that we can execute war orders in case of war...One is at Andrews AFB at all times, a 10-minute helicopter ride from the White House...There is a U-2, what we call the spook plane...There is a SR-71, the high flying spook plane..." (High is right—80,000 feet!)

After a few more minutes of this, seeing the radar dishes, more planes,

hangars that are too small for the B-52 Stratofortresses, causing the tail sections stick out, I get this idea: Hey, you guys aren't fools.

I ask the question: "Captain. I don't mean this in any way to be misinterpreted, but do you ever think about what you are preparing for here..?"

What I didn't say is that this is the craziest place I've ever been! He happens to be a very human guy and doesn't interpret my question in anything but the most human way.

"Well, no. I suppose sometimes. But it's like anything else. We're so close to it day after day, its something natural. I suppose when I do think about it I get upset, but the way I figure it, it's a job, the job has to be done, and that's all there is. But I don't dwell on it..."

I move the conversation into other areas, keeping things moving, saying, yeah, I know what you mean, and talking about the Russians, etc., threats, the imperfect world, the importance of doing the job correctly. But in the back of my head I am absolutely terrified. These guys like the ones I've been seeing all day all over the place, SAC HQ jockeys and Pentagon brass, are seriously involved in a very serious thing.

Take a look: SAC has more than 100,000 employees, including 18,000 officers, 86,000 NCOs. The Command in Omaha has within its grasp about 400 long-range bombers including B-52s, and FB-111s stationed at 28 USAF bases around the world, and about 30 affiliated bases in other countries; has approximately 600 KC/RC/EC-135 tanker aircraft to refuel these long-range bombers in flight; has a host of E-4 National Emergency Airborne Command Post aircraft which are converted Boeing 747s; a host of SAC Airborne Post (Looking Glass) aircraft for a SAC general officer and selected staff, a converted Boeing 707 that flies 8 hours with one Looking Glass in the air at all times; it has the SR0711 recon spook plane that looks like Darth Vader's favorite method of transport; a bunch of U-2s; then you get the ICBMs, 52 Titan IIs, 550 Minuteman IIIs, and another 450 Minuteman IIs at 32 locations in 23 states and maybe a dozen or so places overseas. SAC out laid \$3.8 billion in fiscal year 1981, is about 8.3 percent of the Air Force budget, 2.4 percent of the DOD budget, 0.5 percent of the federal budget, and 0.1 percent of GNP. The SAC operating budget and maintenance totals about \$1 billion a year. That's a drop in the bucket, sure. But the power in their hands can, as I was told by Col. McNeil, "destroy the world."

My afternoon talk went okay. They treated me like a VIP. They liked what I had to say, and were most impressed and effusive in their praise of Mobil's PR approach, which they agree with, aggressively meeting the problem head on and dealing with the facts. I later was taken on a VIP tour of the SAC Underground Command Post. That made me a true believer.

The command post occupies about three acres of space, is rectangular and surrounded by two-foot-thick concrete. It was built when Curtis LeMay put

SAC together in the late 1940s and then was bomb-proof. No more. Which is why there are the flying command posts, which duplicate the underground command post's abilities. The guide dazzled me with technology. They have screens glowing with all kinds of red, green, and yellow numbers, which give the CINC SAC an instant recon reading of the preparedness of all SAC forces in the world. They have red ones all over the place.

The enclosed viewing command post above the center from which the post commanders can see everybody below and supervise looks like the set from the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, or *Star Wars*. There are beeps, lights, and microphones, and speakers squawking all the time.

The host gave us what were called "demos." The guy in the communications center picked up the red phone. Immediately red lights and sirens went off. That would simulate his act if SAC's radar around the continent sensed any incoming ICBMs or Russkie bombers. Within two seconds the SAC bases around the world—and I mean around the world, more than 40 of them—answered the phone. When they answered they didn't know if it was the real thing or not! But of course it was a test and the communications chief immediately explained what he had in mind.

"This is SAC HQ, this is a demo for some visiting VIPs. Please report your status..."

A major in the airborne command post reported what they were doing there. It was all rehearsed and done plenty of times before, as though each of the various SAC people had a script they had read before, which they did. They gave the temperature, etc. The guys in the Arctic Circle above Alaska gave a weather reading of mild skies at 20 below, that kind of thing...

Each base communicated by dedicated landlines, or UHF or HF radio. They have several backup systems in case a satellite is knocked out, and go through every contingency plan they have. It was very impressive.

But what really got me was walking underground. The walkway is reinforced concrete, a modern man-made cave, brown-black walls, with bright overhead lights encased in metal screens. It feels like a bunker, which of course it is. Only no movie here, it's real. You go down several staircases, up a few more, then down some more. You pass through several open doors which are made of reinforced steel and, if closed, would mean that you are under nuclear attack.

I was with about 15 PAOs from other SAC bases, who were also on tour. Everyone was Air Force except me. My corporate uniform was my blue three-piece and I had my yellow V-Badge #118 hanging from my lapel. On the walk, I'd chat with this guy or that, and they would ask me about the outside, what kinds of jobs were available and such. We passed several of the SP/Elite boys, who stood at attention in little kiosks, platforms with a desk affair in front of them. We all raised our badges as we passed. At one

point the SP had to physically handle the badge by code. That was his job and he did it.

As we were going down one of the winding stairways, I heard a pounding of feet behind us. Everybody stopped and turned back to see one of the SPs leaning over the banister addressing the officer in charge.

“SIR, are you aware, SIR, that a V-Badge is among your group. SIR?”

This was spoken without the slightest hint of humor or form. This was a guy doing a job, which he was. Everybody looked around and finally eyes came to me. I was the V-Badge, the only one. The officer in charge said, yes, it’s okay.

The SP said, “YES, SIR.” And went back up the stairs.

I wonder if he thought I might be some kind of Red. Or if I hadn’t been kosher in some way, would this guy have taken out that .45 and done his duty? The thought gave me the chills, still does. These guys aren’t kidding. It was with this in mind that I saw all the technological wizardry underground. It poisoned the rest of the day for me.

A vague feeling was with me. These guys are doing some kind of job that would drive me absolutely mad. They aren’t fooling themselves into thinking they are working for the betterment of mankind. They are there to destroy an entire continent if ordered. And they would. It’s built into their very being, following orders, and doing their duty.

SAC has a slogan that is everywhere: *Peace...It’s Our Profession*. I thought of *1984* by George Orwell, the concepts of double think, double speak and the Big Lie. Or is it the truth? Peace through strength ... force must meet counter-force... weakness causes war. Ideas like that. Facing what these boys do knocked me off my equilibrium.

We had a VIP dinner at the Omaha Press Club, a pretty nice place atop one of downtown Omaha’s tallest buildings, which is about 24 stories. Nice view of the city, a tidy locale of about 100,000 people. Omaha is a dump, a depressing, badly built old city that looks like it has seen better days, which of course it has. The Union Pacific RR building dominates, and RR tracks are everywhere, crossing streets and so forth. But the town in winter, slush and dirty snow around, abandoned downtown buildings, parking lots where torn down buildings had been before. Whew, it was depressing.

Gen. Cane was there. All the AF guys were in civilian clothing. For people who look so sharp in the uniforms, they look pretty sloppy when they get into civvies. They looked like used car salesmen. They don’t know a thing about fashion and dress. Most of them wore bland cowboy boots. The general had a suit coat that was probably in fashion in 1958. They drink a lot. The women are a bit butch. A couple of them are no-nonsense types, but others simply look like misfits. I saw one of the officers from Vandenberg leave the cocktail party after dinner with the woman officer from Arkansas.

Both had had too much to drink. They were whispering when they left together.

I was given the place of honor, across from the general officer, and the host colonel and his wife. We had a very pleasant chat, delicious steak. Col. McIntyre got up to speak after dinner, thanking the general and me for attending.

He said nice words and gave me a gift: a picture of the SAC HQ building with a missile in front of it and the inscription: “Tom—We’re all in this together, thanks, Mike McIntyre, Col. USAF SAC/PA.” It was a nice touch. Of course this is precisely the type of thing the Mobil marketers do: giving a little recognition. It goes a long way toward keeping a guy on the *program*.

Later I wondered about the inscription. Did he mean that as Americans we are in this together—opposing godless communism? Did he mean that we as PR men are in this together—trying to use rhetoric to shore up the free world from destruction from without and within? Or did he mean that as advisors we had the same problems getting the line officers to act properly?

Later during a cocktail chat with other officers, one of the captains, who was a Jesus freak (I saw such a sign on his desk—Live With Jesus, or some such sentiment), asked for my impression of the Underground Command Post. I told him it scared the pants off me. It was simply terrifying. I thought it was reassuring, too. I mean, the Soviets have the equivalent place and I hope they know we have one, too. He got a kick out of the fact I was awestruck.

“Yeah, we don’t see it that way. It’s interesting to get your reaction because we can’t tell what civilians think about it...”

It was clear he loved being part of this group that had such power. I said what impressed me was the destructive force of the entire SAC operation. That’s when Col. McNeil said, seriously and sadly too, I might add, in a hushed voice: “Yeah, we could destroy the world.”

I said: “That’s right.”

The craziest place I’ve ever been. Filled with perfectly normal types who are doing the craziest job imaginable. Some of them realize it. Others think everything is fine. McNeil had been a Marine, knew it could be a load, had been a civilian graduate student in Chinese studies, worked the Pacific with USMC and USAF, been around on the outside, and come back into the USAF as an officer from the Reserves to be a PAO because the place could get him some travel, security. He was like most of the others. He was unendingly curious about civilian life, and what being in business was like.

When I told them that their jobs were just like mine in structure, they couldn’t believe it. Col. McIntyre said the single best thing I did for his men was to show them that, hey, we’re doing just what civilians do. It was good for morale, he said. People came up all the time (there were about 55 PAOs

there) asking me what I made, how corporate life was, what rank I would be if I were in the military structure. I hedged on all specifics. Gen. Cane said he figured I would be a lieutenant colonel in one of the USAF field PA offices reporting to him outside of SAC. I didn't tell him, but whatever rank he might call it, in my outfit I'm just another shitbird.

One officer gave me his résumé. He's leaving and wants to know what I think. I told him he's well qualified to walk right into a PAO job in any corporation in the U.S. Only in his case, he's a field guy, who resents HQ politics, the goldfish bowl of it, and would be a loose cannon in any corporation. I urged him to hook up with a corporation that likes military guys.

My conclusions: 1) The world is a terrifying place, 2) Every citizen—U.S. and Soviet—should visit these institutions of terror to get a glimpse of the possibilities, 3) The military is a perhaps necessary institution given this imperfect world, but it would be a stifling institution that would burn up fast any person who strives to think and act for himself, 4) Mobil is a big dog, 5) Mobil has an organization and command structure, rules of behavior, etc., that are so similar to the military it is scary, and 6) Military bases are perhaps the ugliest places in Christendom.

The visit was tremendous. I got a look at what SAC does, a view on when PAO work is flimflammy and when it's not, how it's similar everywhere. I saw that disillusionment is rampant among people who think and who are in their late 30s or 40s, and, most importantly, that Mobil's mission in the world—to make money and stimulate economic development—is the true *PEACE* Force.

This first occurred to me nearly two years ago when I was in Washington at the M&R PR conference, where all the Mobil affiliates' PAOs came to D.C. and talked to each other for several days. I was probably hyped up on coffee and nicotine one morning when I had this thought: Here we are in D.C., men and women from just about every nation in the industrial democracies, and even some which aren't democracies like Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, and a bunch of others, but here we are talking and getting along and basically committed to our own self betterment and the improvement of our organization. There was a German, a French, a Japanese, couple of Chinese, Aussies, Kiwis, Brits, Dutchmen, Americans, Latins, Africans. Everybody was talking and cooperating. Nobody was interested in killing anybody or figuring out how to destroy a society or culture or another army. We were working to supply a commodity needed by everybody and, in the process, help our mutual organization get rich, and us rich if we could.

It was then that I realized that international corporations are probably the only force loose in the world that truly binds people together in a mutually beneficial way. They can be full of crap, too, which of course we know

all too well, but these are human organizations working to better their members, the organization itself, and those who come in contact with it. Their scope is narrow: the market place and economic life. But, hey, that's a start and it's a lot.

Perhaps what nations do isn't as benign as what international corporations do. For instance, who do you think people believe did most to feed more, clothe more, lift more from poverty, and provide more health than anybody else were? President FDR or some other politico? Sure, FDR led the forces that crushed the Nazis and Japanese imperialists. But who created whose enterprises that created the wealth? It was Henry Ford, Carnegie, Morgan, Kaiser, John D. Rockefeller, and their ilk. Rockefeller, Ford et al were antsy pricks and sometimes strike-breaking killers. But their work was the production of wealth such as the world had never seen.

The military guys like SAC'ers are the steady guns needed in an imperfect world, who devote their lives to preparing and executing destruction. But it's nation-states and politicians and theoreticians and their ilk that get everybody into the trouble. Not the corporations. I think popular culture and conventional wisdom have it backwards. Maybe I'm wrong, but at the SAC base, I was comforted to be part of an organization whose stated purpose is to make money in a peaceful environment, and which works toward stabilizing cultures in perhaps the most efficient way known on the globe, the free market where everybody can get rich.

