

Interview with Lieutenant General Albert P. Clark, USAF, Ret.  
Superintendent, USAF Academy, August 1, 1970–July 31, 1974  
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Influence of Earlier Assignments and Experiences

Issues Related to an Unpopular War

Relationships Within the Academy

Important Changes at the Academy

General Clark was superintendent of the United States Air Force Academy from August 1970 through July 1974. Born at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, August 27, 1913, he graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1936. In June 1942 he went to England as second in command of the first American fighter unit in the European theater. On July 26, 1942, he was shot down over France, and spent almost three years as a prisoner of the Germans in Stalag Luft 3. After World War II he commanded a fighter-bomber wing and an air division, and was director of military personnel at Headquarters Air Force, vice commander of Tactical Air Command, and commander of Air University. He retired from the Air Force in 1974 at the conclusion of his assignment as superintendent of the academy. General Clark was a command pilot and was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters.

Influence of Earlier Assignments and Experiences

Q: General Clark, you had a long and distinguished military career before coming to the academy. I'd like to begin by learning how some of those earlier assignments and experiences influenced you as superintendent.

West Point

You graduated from West Point with the class of 1936, a class that included Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams. I understand that you and General Stillman (the academy's first commandant) and General Disosway (later to become commander of Tactical Air Command) were all WFCB's ("worthless first-class bucks"). Could you explain what a WFCB was and tell us how experiences at West Point may have influenced you later as superintendent at the Air Force Academy. Did you ever think when you were a cadet that you would become a superintendent some day?

Clark: Maybe I can answer that last one first. I have an interesting story. Later as superintendent, we had a conference of superintendents every year, and we'd go to one of the academies or another to hold a conference. And one year it was at West Point, and the superintendent put us all up in his quarters, big quarters. It was right on the edge of the parade ground. And I can recall one afternoon being upstairs in my skivvies looking out the window at a parade. And I said to myself, never in my wildest dreams did

I ever expect as a cadet to be looking out the window of the superintendent's quarters at a parade.

WFCB meant "worthless first-class buck." I think it's probably still true that it's very difficult to give every first classman a meaningful job that justifies an officer's rank. And that problem, of course, still was there in my day. The first commandant, Richardson, General Richardson, he gave every first classman some chevrons, whether he had a job or not. He was our commandant my first two years. He was a real gentleman. I don't know what kind of a soldier he was. He was a cavalryman. But he spent a lot of time with us as plebes and third classmen, teaching us how to be gentlemen, in addition to officers.

I never forgot that because at the end of that year we had a new commandant who was just the antithesis. He was a real field soldier, Simon Bolivar Buckner, who was the commander in the battle of Okinawa and was killed in the battle. His father had been a Confederate leader who gave away Forts Henry and Donaldson on the Ohio River, and I don't think he had ever forgotten it. He must have been born very late in his father's life. But he was a real field soldier. I can remember at the end of some field exercises, he would make certain points that were very impressive and understandable, and we learned a lesson from them. But one of the first things he did was to take all of the "flunky butt" out of the cadet store. "Flunky butt" was all of the things that men would use like Aqua Velva on their face, that smelled good. He got rid of all those things.

And he said, "If you're gonna smell, smell like a man." My wife and many other wives of our classmates, years later, said he spoiled a whole generation of graduates.

But the WFCB came because the policy was changed, and he took chevrons away from, oh, I guess, the lower half of the class. And he in effect said, "You're worthless first-class bucks. If you weren't good enough to win a chevron, you're nobody."

Of course those of us who wore no chevrons deeply resented it. It was a very grave mistake on his part. But in later years we used to joke about it, especially those of us in the Air Force. And I can remember the day I sat in General Disosway's office when he was commander of Tactical Air Command and I was his vice commander, and with us was General Milton, his chief of staff, and we were talking about those days. And he said, "Well I was a WFCB."

And I said, "So was I."

And Milton said, "So was I."

And so there were an awful lot of men who went on to success, at least in the Air Force, possibly not in the Army, in spite of the fact that they were branded as "worthless first-class bucks."

I have a few other comments on this that might be worthwhile. I think that it may be useful to note that we never saw the superintendent. He never made contact with cadets, except on the night before a football game in the mess hall at the big rally he would stand on the table and talk about being a great football player himself. And he would dangle his

golden football, which was a watch fob that all former football players received, and that's the only time we ever saw him. And I, in retrospect, feel that one of the reasons so many of us went on half way through our career very uncomfortable in presence of senior officers was because we were never given an opportunity to rub shoulders with them when we were cadets.

And I tried to remember that. And when I was here, I never succeeded completely, but I tried to interview each squadron for at least an hour each week. But at that time there were forty squadrons, and it was hard to get through them in a year. My visits always made the commandant nervous. I didn't invite the commandant to be present. Sometimes he had somebody there, and sometimes he didn't. But when I ran into something that I thought was a serious issue of some sort from talking to the cadets, I would notify him to look into it. And I think sometimes he kind of resented that. But I was able to at least be known by all the cadets. And when I was able to face them alone without any staff officer support or anything, I think it enabled them to speak their feelings.

And there was a lot of difference between squadrons. I was amazed because all the squadrons were supposed to be technically identical—same number of whites, same number of blacks, same number of scholars, and same number of dummies, same number of athletes, and so forth. And yet at the end of the year, they were so entirely different. And of course, at least from my point of view, the difference was in the leadership of the first class. There were some classes that would win an honor squadron three years in a row. And there were other squadrons that never even tried. They were not interested in excellence. So it was an interesting

observation to see how different those squadrons could be as a function of their internal leadership.

Q: Prisoner of War

On July 26, 1942, you were shot down while flying a Spitfire over France. You spent almost three years as a prisoner of the Germans in Stalag Luft 3, where General Stillman was also a prisoner. Could you tell us what took most of your time and efforts there, and whether your experiences as a POW influenced your values or outlook as superintendent.

Clark: Well, I came in as the practically number one American in uniform, in U. S. uniform. There were other Americans there flying with the British in British uniforms. But I was among the first three who were shot down in July of 1942. And I was the first one to reach the officers' camp. I was the senior American officer, and I held that position for six or eight months before the first full colonel came in and automatically became the senior American officer.

I started with a handful of men, and the group grew very rapidly until by March of 1943 there were about 160 of us. And it was my responsibility to look after their interests in a British camp. And although everything was very fine, it was clearly a British camp—British rations, British policies, and so on. And the British, some of them, had been prisoners since the third of September 1939, and they had developed their internal policies, procedures, and attitudes. And a lot of them were getting food from America, “Bundles for Britain” they were called. We got nothing. It was another year and a half

before our various departments, like the Department of Commerce, Department of State, managed to get themselves together to start shipping us the things we needed as prisoners. But the British were very generous. And they gave us, sometimes, clothing. One of the most wonderful presents I ever received was from a British Army officer, who gave me a pair of flannel pajamas. And they were priceless.

I learned a great deal about myself and about maintaining good relationships under difficult times. And while I later became a less senior officer—we ended up with six, eight, ten full colonels in our camp—but I had been there so long that I was always given some pretty important responsibilities, and was working with the kids, largely in the escape activities. I guess I chose to do that early in my time there because the British invited me to join in tunneling. They gave me a code so that I could communicate in code in our correspondence. And so I was invited by them into just about everything that was going on that was important.

I used to go out with the senior British officers to argue with the Germans on various matters. There were always arguments, always things that we didn't like that they were doing, and vice versa. So it was a command experience for me. And under the circumstances, which were rather unique, none of us had orders that put us in charge of those other thousands, as it turned out, thousands of young American second lieutenants. We just assumed it. And while now it's formalized in the Code of Conduct, it wasn't then. But with very few exceptions, all the kids who came in accepted the structure as the normal state of affairs, and we ran the inside of the camp very much like any typical military organization.

So it was a welcome experience for me, and in one other respect it was important. I was very ambitious, and I think that's one of the reasons I got there. I got there faster than I needed to. I was eager to get into combat, and none of us were ready. And I got shot down very quickly. And I had time to think a lot about ambition and whether ambition was important in my future service. I think I finally adjusted to the fact that I should do the best I could at whatever assignment I'm given. And the hell with ambition—it'll take care of itself. And it was, I think, a good lesson that I learned there, because a lot of people go through their whole career agonizing with their ambitions, some of which are not achievable.

So it was a learning experience. Three years was too long. I never would want to do it again. But most of us who were in our camp were the old prisoners. We were together for a long time. We became bonded. We considered ourselves a band of brothers. And after the war we were together, reunion after reunion after reunion, and we're still in contact with each other. Some of the closest friends I've ever had were among those prisoners. So it was a wonderful human-relationships experience.

Q: Do you think of any specific influence it might have had on you as superintendent?

Clark: I guess the most important thing is the establishment of values and the techniques of leadership, techniques of handling problems with people. And trying to maintain discipline in a very difficult circumstance and yet

not end up as an ogre with a lot of young people resenting your authority. So it was helpful from that point of view, definitely.

Q: First Impression of the Academy

In August 1954 you were chairman of a board at Air Force Headquarters to design a distinctive uniform for cadets. When did you first hear about the creation of the academy? What was your impression of the academy at that time? What do you recall about your experience in designing uniforms?

Clark: Well, the first time I started thinking about an Air Force Academy was in 1947 when we became independent and I knew it was inevitable.

As a matter of interest, my father-in-law was an Army officer and historian, military historian. And he had served, oddly enough, to rebuild the Civil War battlefields in the vicinity of Fredericksburg, Virginia, which included Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, two battles of Fredericksburg, and several others. And while he was there rebuilding these battlefields, for the first time they were putting in roads, cutting the brush off of the places where all the battles were fought. Some of the old guys were still alive, and they used to come down and want to see where they stood, and so on. And several of them left him with very important gifts. One of them was a set of the *Records of the Rebellion*, which was a set of all the official records of combat orders on both sides down through

at least battalion level. And it was put out by the Government Printing Office in the seventies, and it filled seven book boxes. It was priceless. And some old guy gave it to him. My father-in-law hauled them around in his professional books until he retired. Then he gave them to me.

I hauled them around as professional books for some time, but it was getting very difficult. About that time the academy was an inevitability, so I wrote to the commander of the Air University, told him I had these books which I was sure would be one of the first items that the Air Force Academy Library would want, and would he be willing to hold them in escrow for a future Air Force Academy. He said he would be delighted; he sent a truck to pick them up, and took them down to Air University, and put them somewhere in storage.

Well, eventually we had an Air Force Academy, and eventually I came out to make a visit, and I went to the library. I said, “Do you have a set of the *Records of the Rebellion*?”

And they said, “Oh, yes, yes, we have it.”

So I felt relieved that they had finally gotten there. I thought no more about it. But eventually General Moorman, who was my predecessor, a very wonderful man, tried to regularize the immense problems of gifts to the academy. And he put out a little pamphlet, “This is what we want, and this is what we don’t want.” I brought a copy home to show to my wife, and she found in there that gifts of books would be annotated with a nice sticker that indicated who gave them and who was to

be honored by them. And she said, “Well, I must have those *Records of the Rebellion* marked to honor my father,” who was then deceased.

And I said, “Don’t worry about it. It’s probably already done.

“No,” she said, “I’m going to write to Tommy and check on it,” which she did. And then there was a long delay before he answered.

He finally wrote, “I’m dreadfully sorry, but we do have a set of the *Records of the Rebellion*, but they came from a different source.” And he said, “I’ve already undertaken to trace what happened to your seven book boxes that should have been sent from the Air University to us long ago. And you will hear from the commander of the Air University.”

Well, eventually he wrote and said he could find no trace of them. They were gone. And he thought some retiring colonel probably confused people as to their value and was given them. So that was the end of that story.

But that was my first understanding that we were going to have an academy. I knew we were going to have one, and sure enough we did. I never thought at the time that I would ever be closely associated with it. But I was the director of military personnel, no, I was in charge of a number of military personnel programs in the Pentagon. And General Harmon was planning the academy. He had his office in there, and I supported his efforts, I think bringing papers and records and things. And I remember General Stillman was also a staff officer in the Pentagon at that time, and he invited me down to meet with General Harmon. I don’t think he knew that someday, or soon, really, Harmon was going

to select him as the first commandant of cadets, which was a very wonderful assignment, very deserving. Stillman was wonderful with young officers, young people.

In fact I don't remember at all the fact that I served on a uniform board. I assume that I was a member of the larger Air Force Uniform Board, which was always making changes in the uniforms, and authorizing new things. And I assume that it was in that connection that I was associated with that. But I don't have any memory of the fancy uniforms that came out of that.