

Chief Airey

By CMSgt. Charles Lucas, USAF (Ret.)

IN 1966, the Air Force launched a search for “the best qualified and most impressive individual” in the service to fill a new position, that of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. It said that candidates had to have at least 22 years of active-duty service and two years as a chief master sergeant. Each had to have “the highest standards of integrity and performance.”

At the time, the Air Force had more than 5,900 chiefs on active duty. Fewer than half had the required time in service. Only 26 could be nominated. Only three were chosen as finalists, and the job went to tough, up-from-the-ranks Paul Wesley Airey. In the Air Force’s 50 years, the selection of Airey must surely rate as one of its golden moments.

In Airey’s selection, the system worked. Today’s Air Force continues to benefit from that decision. Airey was a man who did not complete high school but gained a diploma through off-duty study, even acquiring a college associate degree. He was captured and imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II, but he came back and reenlisted because he liked the Air Force life.

Airey helped define the role of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force and, as such, was instrumental in the success over the years of USAF’s most visible symbol of the enlisted force. Establishing the position of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force had been opposed by some in the Air Force hierarchy, but in the end Airey won their respect and cooperation.

Airey brought many benefits to the force, but he is reluctant to claim

credit for anything accomplished on his watch. “I will never be convinced that I was the most qualified or the best,” Chief Airey said. “I ended up with the job, so you go out and do the best you can.”

Paul Airey, who will be 74 in December and lives in Panama City, Fla., grew up in a Navy town, Quincy, Mass., with its seaport and shipyards. Joining the Navy was his first choice when he left high school in 1942, but it was not to be.

The Navy Way

Airey recalled that the chief petty officer in the Navy recruiting office was “a belligerent type that really turned me off.” The CPO seemed completely uninterested in the young man before him and told him to come back later. Instead, Airey went down the street and joined the Army Air Forces.

“I owe that petty officer much for changing my mind,” Airey remarked.

After Airey completed basic training at Atlantic City, N.J., the AAF sent him to Scott Field, Ill., to train as an airborne radio operator. “I wanted to be an aerial gunner,” Airey noted, adding, “I got some consolation when I learned that crews on B-17s and B-24s had the radio operator double as a waist gunner.”

He completed radio school at Scott, received his gunnery training at Tyndall Field, Fla., and moved on to Salt Lake City and Boise, Idaho, for crew assignment and transition training for the B-24 aircraft. He was assigned to the 485th Bomb Group, and the crew was ordered to North Africa in March 1944. They took the southern route—West Palm Beach,



As the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, he paved the way for those who came after him.

Fla., Puerto Rico, British Guiana, and Brazil. From there, the crew crossed the Atlantic to Dakar in West Africa and flew on to Tunisia for a month until an airfield was completed at Foggia, Italy.

Newly promoted Technical Sergeant Airey was on his 28th combat mission in July 1944, flying over oil refineries on the outskirts of Vienna, Austria, when his B-24 was hit by flak.

"We got as far as Hungary when the pilot ordered us to get out," Airey recalled. "There was no hesitation on my part. Right out the camera hatch I went at 18,000 feet. I remember getting the 'psycho card' [radio code] out of my pocket, tearing it up, and scattering it to the wind." Reaching into another pocket, he found his cigarettes, lit one, and waited for the inevitable. It didn't take long arriving.

"As I got closer to the ground," said Airey, "I could see a group of farmers coming after me. I never got out of my harness. I got the hell beat out of me."

German soldiers and police arrived and took him to a local jail for the night. Eventually, he ended up at Stalag Luft IV, a German POW camp near the Baltic Sea. In February 1945, as the Allied armies pushed farther into the Reich, he and 6,000 fellow POWs began a forced march of roughly 400 miles to another camp near Berlin. That's where he ended his POW days; he was liberated by British forces on May 2, 1945.

After a 90-day recuperation leave, and weighing less than 100 pounds, Airey was returned to the United States. There was no question in his mind that he would be going back on duty. "Even as a POW, I was giving much consideration to staying in," he said. "I liked it. There was something about it I wanted. I came off leave and reenlisted."

He was assigned as an instructor at the radio school at Scott Field, where he spent the next six years. In 1951 he was sent to Naha AB, Okinawa, as NCOIC of communications. Responsible for radio repair, the young Airey soon found the tropical moisture and fungi of the place were playing havoc with the radio and radar equipment. He developed a corrosion control assembly line to correct the problem. "I didn't invent anything," Airey said. "The process was there. All you had to do was read it. I dug it out and set it up."

Others thought he deserved high praise. At a ceremony in which he was awarded the Legion of Merit for his initiative, he was credited with saving millions of dollars in electronic equipment that would have otherwise deteriorated.

"First Shirt"

On his return from Okinawa in 1953, Airey made a career change that would set him up as a candidate for the post of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force when it was created. He became a first sergeant

at Scott, and over the next 14 years he held "first shirt" assignments at five bases. "Of all the jobs I had in the Air Force, next to being Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, I think first sergeant was probably the best," said Airey. "I liked it. I liked the discipline part of it. I liked being able to counsel and lead. You never knew what was going to happen, day or night."

In March 1964, the Air Force Association's Enlisted Council asked USAF to appoint a "Sergeant Major of the Air Force" through whom "enlisted personnel can freely express their opinions and recommendations on matters ranging from mission effectiveness to personal problems." The proposal was turned down but resurfaced in 1965 when the Army created its first Sergeant Major of the Army position.

By 1966, the time was right. At that point, Airey was at Tyndall AFB, the same base at which he had completed gunnery training 23 years earlier. There, he first heard about the proposed CMSAF position. "I thought, whoever gets that job is really going to have to go through a lot," said Airey. "What a great honor it would be, but I didn't think I had any chance of being selected."

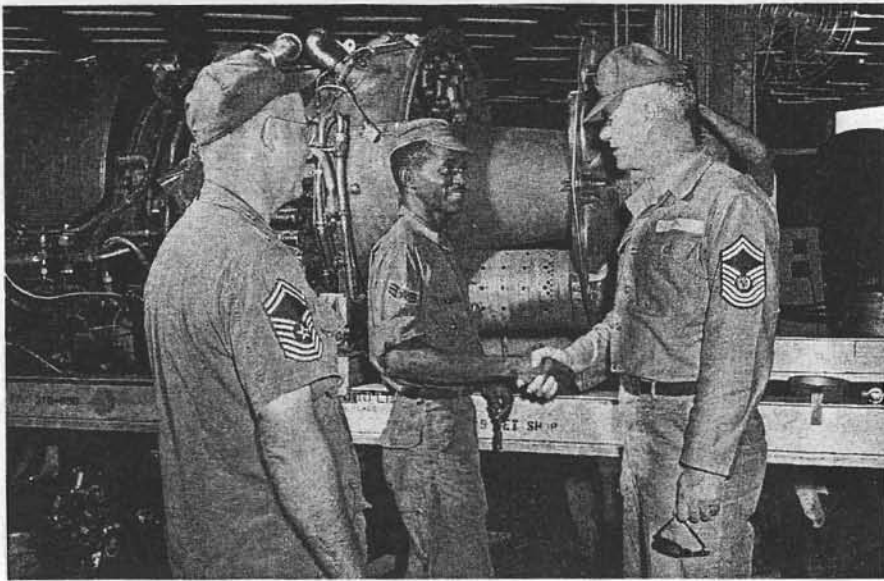
Airey was unaware of the Washington political controversy over the proposed position. Principal personalities involved were Gen. John P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, and Rep. Mendel Rivers (D-S.C.), the powerful chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Noting that the Army and Marine Corps each had senior enlisted positions, Rivers introduced a bill to establish such a position in each of the armed forces. "The top NCO would advise the leadership on the morale, welfare, and career opportunities of the enlisted men and women of their respective service," the bill read.

Support for the idea grew on Capitol Hill and at the Pentagon. However, resistance to the position by senior officers in some of the services was evident.

McConnell weighed his options and asked for a recommendation from his Air Council. In August 1966, McConnell adopted the Rivers recommendation, with minor changes, and directed that steps be taken to establish the position administratively. Two months later, even though



Newly sworn in, CMSAF Paul W. Airey accepts congratulations from his boss, Gen. John P. McConnell, USAF Chief of Staff, after the April 3, 1967, ceremony installing Airey as the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.



Visiting the troops became a hallmark of Airey's tenure. Here, he talks with A1C Frederick J. Simmons, 31st Tactical Fighter Wing, in Vietnam in October 1967, while Chief Master Sergeant Hair looks on.

it was clear that the Rivers bill lacked sufficient votes for passage, the Air Force announced the creation of the position of "Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force," which it said "was to be filled by an individual who will become the highest ranking enlisted member of the Air Force."

"In the field, we knew little about the job," Airey said. "Very little came down through military channels."

The Final Three

Airey, who was by then assigned to Air Defense Command, was one of three finalists interviewed by McConnell and Gen. Bruce K. Holloway, vice chief of staff, at the Pentagon. (The other two were CMSgt. Jefferson F. Marsh of PACAF and CMSgt. Conrad F. Stevens of MAC.) Shortly after their individual interviews with McConnell in January 1967, it was announced that Chief Airey had been selected as the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.

The installation ceremony for the first CMSAF was held on April 3, 1967, in the filled-to-capacity conference room of the Secretary of the Air Force. In attendance were Chief of Staff McConnell, the deputy chiefs of staff, the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps.

Noting that the year 1967 marked the Air Force's 20th anniversary as a separate service, Chief Airey said the changes and progress facilitated

by the enlisted force were hallmarks of those two decades. He also said continued progress was assured because: "It is pride and dedication that keep enlisted men at their posts, not the lure of an easy life and a secure future. For the dedicated airman, it is not only money or the job to be done. It is the desire to serve our country that motivates today's Air Force."

At the ceremony, McConnell told him, "OK, you've got the job. Run with it. You know being Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force is 90 percent common sense and 10 percent knowledge. You have to try to get along with the Air Staff. There are people who will make a patsy out of you, both officer and enlisted. Others will try to use you. Many will have axes to grind."

The Pentagon was buzzing with reports that McConnell, in fact, wanted no part of the new addition to his staff. Many believed Rivers had forced the position down his throat. For his part, Airey said he was never certain how strong McConnell was for or against the position. "I do know this," said Airey. "After a few months in office, I could not have asked for a better supporter."

Of more concern to Airey was the need to determine his precise duties. There was, obviously, no Air Force precedent. He read and reread the job description. It was his first Pentagon assignment. In fact, until his interview for the job two months

earlier, he had never been in the building.

"I think you have to remember that 1967 was a period of turmoil for many in the United States," he noted. "The leadership recognized the need for improved communications. Maybe that's why the job was established."

Chief Airey spent his first few weeks in a tiny fifth-floor office of the Pentagon as he awaited preparation of his permanent office. From the beginning, Chief Airey made it clear that his office was not going to become a clearinghouse for complaints. At the time, he declared, "This is not an office of the Inspector General, and it is not an assignments office."

It Wasn't Just Vietnam

A solid month of briefings by the Air Staff drove home one point very quickly. Retention was a serious problem. The first-term reenlistment rate was at a 12-year low. The Vietnam War was blamed by most, but Airey believed that equal blame had to be put on the enlisted promotion system.

He recalled, "We had people who were in grade 10 years or more, in frozen career fields, with no opportunity for promotion."

His work with a team of Air Force specialists helped to produce the Weighted Airman Promotion System, which he said is his most important contribution as CMSAF. According to Airey, "The end result was a promotion system which today is still in effect and is by far the fairest, best, most equitable enlisted promotion system of any of the armed forces."

In his second month in office, Airey traveled to Olmsted AFB, Pa., on his first field trip. "The base was scheduled to close, morale was low, and they were looking for a shot in the arm," Airey said. Soon, traveling to visit with the troops in distant locations became a hallmark of his tenure.

He didn't only visit with the enlisted force. On one trip to Maxwell AFB, Ala., he met with Lt. Gen. John W. Carpenter, commander of Air University, about establishing a senior NCO academy for Air Force people. "I felt our senior and chief master sergeants needed more advanced management training than



Airey continues to serve the enlisted force—often working through the Air Force Sergeants Association and AFA and by speaking at enlisted events, such as this occasion last year at the Senior NCO Academy at Maxwell.

was available at the major command academies." Carpenter favored the idea and said the academy should be at Air University. "I had no strong feelings about where it was located," Airey said. "I just wanted one."

Two years after he left office, the academy was approved and then activated in 1972 at Maxwell AFB. Airey is proud of the fact that he is a regular speaker at the school.

Airey sees the academy as the top level of professional military education for an NCO. "I look at it as an inducement, something to strive for," said Airey. "It should be a prerequisite for promotion to chief. I have heard of senior NCOs who retired rather than go to the academy. My reaction is: Good. Get rid of them. We don't need them."

Airey lauds today's professional military education opportunities, which he believes have caused a transformation of the service.

"The educational level of the enlisted force today is comparable to the officer force that I knew in World War II," he said. "The majority of the officers in World War II did not have a degree, which would be unthinkable today. If I had to pick 100 chief master sergeants off the ramp today, compared with 100 from the time that I made it, the difference wouldn't be in guts and ability. It would be in training."

Waiting, Watching

Still, in the early days, he was not

always welcomed with open arms. He recalled encountering open resistance from various senior officers who had opposed the creation of the CMSAF office on principle. Airey was always conscious that, in such occasions, he had a very high-level audience. "I think the Chief of Staff was watching me and waiting for reports on me," he recalled. "It took about six months. From then on, things began to look up."

Airey at times came in contact with Capitol Hill, mostly regarding constituent complaints. Rep. Wright Patman (D-Tex.), the chairman of the House Banking Committee, once asked him to come along on a tour of US military bases in Europe. Patman had received reports that servicemen there were paying usurious rates for loans, and he had sought out Airey upon learning that he had experience working with credit unions. The trip resulted in the establishment of credit unions at US bases in Europe.

Airey learned early that a knack for diplomacy and a tough skin are required equipment for CMSAF. "You are fair game for criticism from people who might not like you just [as a result of] petty jealousies. There are always people who will disagree with

you. I find no fault with that. I'm not going to be liked by everyone." Airey frequently equates CMSAF duties to that of the first sergeant role that he knew so well. "There are the midnight calls and some unpleasant tasks, but I still think it's a lot better than running a shop or an office."

Airey hasn't seen much change in the job of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force since he initiated it in 1967. He has, however, become concerned that, in recent years, nominations for the CMSAF job have become focused on those serving as senior enlisted advisers to the commanders making the nominations. "I am a great believer that the CMSAF does not have to be an SEA. We have a lot of great candidates who hold high-level or visible positions."

Because he was a pioneer, few at the time noticed that at the end of his term on July 31, 1969, Airey did not retire from the Air Force. He accepted an assignment to Tyndall AFB for one year out of a desire to complete 30 years of service. However, since then, every CMSAF has ended his tour in the top job with a retirement ceremony. Should the CMSAF return to regular Air Force duty following his term of office? Airey, in retrospect, believes not. "To return to the mainstream of the Air Force is a mistake," he said. "There is no room for two Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force at any one time."

In a sense, however, Airey has never left the Air Force. In retirement, he has served as a regional director of the Air Force Sergeants Association and continues to support AFSA programs. He has served as a chapter president of AFA. He makes numerous speaking engagements, usually at leadership schools, NCO academies, dedications, and anniversaries. He is a member of the Board of Trustees for the Airmen Memorial Museum and a member of the Air Force Memorial Foundation and the Air University Foundation.

"I'm as close to the Air Force today as I could possibly be," said Airey. "I just don't put the uniform on every morning." ■

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