

CHARTER CHIEFS

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THE CHIEF

45 YEARS OF LEADERSHIP

One of the most significant events in Air Force Enlisted History was the creation of the rank of E-9, the CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT.

The explosion of technology during and following World War II and Korea created a need for enlisted men with leadership and technical ability far above that normally expected of a Master Sergeant as well as more formal education. Congress created the super grades as a part of the Career Compensation Act of 1958 and decreed that 1% of the enlisted force could be in pay grade E-9 and 2% in pay grade E-8. To be eligible for promotion to these grades, the enlisted man would be required to have at least 8 years enlisted service for E-8 and 10 years for E-9.

The basic intent of Congress was to relieve the grade suppression and stagnation that had resulted from higher technical needs and faulty personnel programs. Grade suppression is one of those terms created by the military and in this case meant that a MSgt was supervising 1 or more other MSgts. Stagnation speaks for itself. There was no mandatory retirement or up or out program in effect at that time.

When the Career Compensation Act of 1958 was enacted, Air Force Personnel officials did an in depth study and grouped all Career Fields into one of the three categories, HIGHLY TECHNICAL, TECHNICAL, or NON-TECHNICAL. These officials then determined that the HIGHLY TECHNICAL FIELDS would receive more than the 1% authorized by the original bill, the TECHNICAL FIELDS would receive about 1% and the NON-TECHNICAL FIELDS under 1%.

Upon completion of this study, Manpower Officials went to the manning documents and selected those Master Sergeant positions that required the higher grade and changed the slots to E-8 or E-9 as appropriate. This did not create new vacancies for promotion from TSgt to MSgt as each slot converted was dropped as an E-7 and picked up as an E-8 or E-9.

The Air Force had a unique group of about 58,000 MSgts on board as a source to select the super graders. They were men who grew up during the great depression when it was not unusual for young men to leave school at an early age to get jobs and help support the family. What these men lacked in formal education, they made up for in experience and knowledge gained in the school of hard knocks. Many were already in the service when WWII broke out. They served through the war, remained with the Army, transferred to the

Air Force in 1947, served through the Haylift of 1948, The Berlin Airlift, Integration, Korea, and the massive retraining that took place when the old propeller driven aircraft were replaced with jets as well as the explosion of technology that was taking place. They had been tried and tempered.

It was now time to make the promotions. Air Force opted to require 10 years service for promotion to E-8 and 11 years service to E-9 rather than the 8 and 10 established in the basic law. They also required that eligibles take and pass a written supervisory test with a percentile score of 90 or more. Since no such supervisory test had been written for this purpose, the supervisory portion of the Warrant Officer Test was used. This supervisory test was no problem for MSGts with good reading skills who had attended one of the NCO Academies but presented an insurmountable obstacle for others.

This supervisory test would not have been a problem of the MSgt of today but many of the MSgts of that time could not read well enough to take and pass simple tests. An enlisted man with a high school education at that time was considered highly educated. Many of the officers on active duty did not have a day college. The reading skills of many MSgts was so poor, they were unable to score high enough to get into the percentile rating. As an example of the education level, the author of this article attended a 1956 NCO Academy Class of 150 of the best MSgts in Fifteenth Air Force. Their average formal education, according to their records, was 10.8 years. This was probably a year or so higher than their actual education as the records of that time reflected what the enlisted man told the classification clerk when initially interviewed for preparation of personnel records. Formal education was not a prime factor to be a good soldier.

The first promotion boards were held at Command Level with Field Grade Officers as members. Quotas and selections were made by AFSC for the first time. Board members looked at demonstrated leadership and supervisory ability, supervisors evaluations, commander's recommendations, and best qualified. In the first cycle, Air Force promoted about 625 to Chief. The greatest number of promotions went to the Aircraft Maintenance Career Field. These 625 came to be known as the CHARTER CHIEFS. There are less than a hundred living today that we have been able to locate.

The selection boards had a difficult role to play in the original selections as enlisted men did not have many, if any, performance reports in their file. The AIRMAN PERFORMANCE RATING SYSTEM had come into being in the mid 50's. Prior to that, the only thing in the file was an entry on the service record that the individual was or was not recommended for the Good Conduct Medal made each time the individual was reassigned. Enlisted Men got very few written commendations in those days. And, human nature being what it is, many of the old timers did everything in their power to keep from having one of these new fangled performance reports written on them.

Another factor was the numbers of eligibles with many years in grade. Thousands had been promoted to MSgt during WWII and had a date of rank in 1942, 43, 44, or 45. There were also large numbers of former officers who had been permitted to enlist in the Army Air Corps at the end of WWII in the grade of MSgt. These were mostly high school

graduates who attended one of the officer training programs and were brought into the enlisted force without one days enlisted service and no enlisted skill.

Naturally, every MSgt on board felt he should be the first one promoted. Time in grade had been a primary factor in promotion for years and they felt their years in grade as MSgt made them the one the Air Force wanted as a super grader. There were about 58,000 MSgts on board at that time and about 625 were to be promoted. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that most are not going to be promoted. The jealousy among MSgts not selected was scandalous. You still hear old timers say they were so upset at not being selected, they retired or that there was a time when time in grade meant something. One of the wives at the 40th Charter Chief Reunion said that the saddest part of the program was that they lost several of their best friends who were not promoted.

The selections were kept under lock and key until 1 December 1959. Announcement and promotion took place that day. There were no selection numbers as you know them today. The selectee was usually informed of his selection by his commander without great fanfare or induction ceremonies and sent back to work. The promotion of this small number resulted in there being 1 or 2 Chiefs at each base at the most. The program did not explode like an atomic burst or a flowering bush in springtime. There were not enough Chiefs at any one location to make a great deal of difference and no standard of conduct or special perks had been established for them. Most of those promoted were the movers and shakers who had gravitated to the more responsible enlisted positions so they saw little change, just a very minor pay raise. The new Chief was treated more with curiosity than anything else. Most continued in the same job and continued to be addressed as Sgt.

Prior to the promotions, many ideas for perks and standards of conduct had been bounced off the walls. High on the list was that they be addressed as Chief. I don't know why Air Staff did not adopt this term of address. Perhaps because they didn't want to be confused with the Navy Chief. Or perhaps because we still had Warrant Officers on board who were Chief Warrant Officers. Other ideas that were run through the system were that the Chief be entitled to a salute and be addressed as sir by junior enlisted personnel, scrambled eggs on their garrison cap visor, a yellow stripe down their trouser leg, a different uniform, and special housing entitlements. None of these ideas came to fruition and the new Chief just sewed on another stripe and got a small pay raise. The program, a jewel in the rough, was cast adrift to sink or swim on its own.

In base housing assignment, the new Chief was given priority over other enlisted men of lower rank, however, the top 5 on the housing list, regardless of rank, were frozen and could not be bumped by a senior enlisted man. One Charter Chief was reassigned to a major air command headquarters in early 1967. Housing was extremely critical. The Chief put in for base housing and was 6th on the list. When his name came up for housing, he was only entitled to a 2 bedroom, one bath duplex as his family consisted of his wife and 3 daughters, the daughters having been born within a 5 year period. Can you picture this Chief with 3 teenage daughters and his wife, a civil service nurse at the base hospital, trying to get ready to go to work and school at the same time in a two bedroom one bath house? Needless to say, this Chief retired when he completed one years service in the new assignment, the

minimum required at that time. What a waste. And a 4 striper with a son and daughter was assigned a 3 bedroom unit with a bath and a half. A penny wise pound foolish policy.

A Charter Chief was assigned back to a major air command headquarters for an unprecedented second tour and assigned duty in a division of the Directorate of Personnel. He served in that job for over 14 months and never once met or was introduced to the Director of Personnel who was a Brigadier General from the old school. Contrast this with the treatment of the same Chief 30 some years later when he was on invitational TDY to Aviano Air Base, Italy, to speak at a MSgt Induction Ceremony. While he was there, the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force, a very senior four star general came to the base for a farewell visit. A special luncheon was scheduled for several enlisted men and the Charter Chief was invited. When General Ryan walked into the room, he went directly to the Charter Chief, introduced himself, thanked the Charter Chief for his contribution to the Air Force, and presented the Chief with his coin. What a difference 30 years and the new officer leadership made.

But the program did swim. The Charter Chiefs served with dignity and the established highest standards of leadership. They forged the ground rules for Chiefs to come. As additional Chiefs were promoted, Chief Groups come into being. The Chiefs worked together. Still addressed as Sgt, they petitioned to be called Chief to no avail. When the first CMSAF came on the scene, he was still addressed as Sgt. Can you imagine addressing a man like CMSAF Airey as Sgt? If he answered the phone, you wouldn't know if he was a 4 stripe Sgt or what. But in the early 70's, the Chiefs took it upon themselves to call each other Chief. Soon, the SMSgts were calling them Chief and the MSgts, and the TSgts, etc. Air Staff saw the writing on the wall and made the official term of address of an E-9 Chief.

The Senior NCO Academy came into being in the early 70's accompanied by a new caliber of officer leadership. USAF Academy graduates were becoming field grade officers and a new wave of cooperation and respect was apparent. These USAF Academy graduates had grown up with the Chief Program and shared a deep mutual respect. It was not uncommon for the Chief to have as much or more formal education as the officer. No more enlisted men who couldn't read well enough to take a simple promotion test.

Soon, other high profile Chiefs came on the scene. Senior Enlisted Advisors, Commandants of NCO Academies, Leadership Schools, and Chiefs filling Command Chief positions. These Chiefs were assigned positions that were formerly held only by commissioned officers and they excelled.

During the adolescent period of the new Chief rank, the Air Force Sergeants Association was formed and matured. Their contributions to the blossoming of the Chief Program were boundless.

And so the prestige of the rank of Chief flowered and today is one of the most respected ranks in the Air Force. The Chief does not manage by fear or intimidation as the old First Sergeant did but by knowledge, training and great leadership ability.

The Charter Chiefs extend their thanks and gratitude to all those Chiefs who followed them taking up the torch and contributing to the growth and maturing of the rank of CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT over the last 45 years.

HAPPY 45TH BIRTHDAY CHIEF

James J. Flaschenriem
Aka JIM FLASCH
Charter Chief, Retired

We Aimed High and Hit The Mark