

Their lineage goes back a long way, and they play a vital role in today's Air Force.

First Shirts

By Bruce D. Callander



Think of a military job that creates stiff personal demands, requires breaking with your primary career field, demands around-the-clock attention, and lasts only three years. Now note that the person holding this job is the first one to which a troubled airman turns when he or she needs serious help.

You begin to grasp the importance of USAF's first sergeants—"first shirts," in Air Force parlance. You also grasp why, with airmen deploying constantly and working at a very high operations tempo, the contribution of these top-level enlisted members is more important than ever.

In the Air Force, "first sergeant" is not a grade but a special duty designation. He or she reports directly to the

unit commander on matters of enlisted morale, welfare, and conduct, and is the chief enlisted advisor to the commander on all of these factors.

The position normally is filled by noncommissioned officers with the permanent ranks of master sergeant, senior master sergeant, or chief master sergeant. They can be identified by the diamond device that they wear on the center of their rank insignia.

CMSgt. Sandra Miller, the first sergeant special duty manager for the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, who today is CMSAF Rodney J. McKinley, said senior NCOs should consider a tour as first sergeant "not only for their career and breadth of experience but for [the sake of] the Air Force."

Specifically, the first shirt helps pro-

vide a commander with a mission-ready enlisted force and prepares enlisted personnel for deployments. He advises the commander on a wide range of topics including the health of his airmen and their esprit de corps, discipline, well-being, career progression, and professional development. The first sergeant works with fellow senior NCOs and supervisory personnel to ensure equitable discipline.

He ensures that supervisors set an appropriate example for subordinates and provides guidance. He oversees

USAF photo by Sandy Wassermiller



As the 381st Training Squadron's first sergeant, MSgt. John Myers speaks to airmen who have just arrived at Sheppard AFB, Tex. When they need help, airmen turn first to their unit's "first shirt."

training in leadership, customs and courtesies, dress and personal appearance, self-discipline, adherence to standards, drill and ceremony, and safety. The first sergeant helps enlisted members adapt to the military environment and adjust to the organization and manages care and upkeep of unit dormitories and adjacent grounds. He coordinates with supervisors to schedule unit functions, duties, leaves, and passes.

The Search for Top-Notch NCOs

Equally important, a unit's first sergeant works closely with the relevant command chief master sergeant—the senior enlisted advisor to the commander at the level of wing, numbered air force, and major command—to ensure airmen are prepared to execute their missions.

“In effect, the first sergeant is a facilitator,” said Miller.

First sergeants are selected through a combination of application and nomination. Once an NCO applies, the application goes through a wing command chief, to a wing commander, to a major command chief, and on to the Military Personnel Center. Sometimes, a nominee will not be released from his primary career field. Assuming the applicant is released, however, the NCO is scheduled to attend the First Sergeant Academy at Maxwell AFB, Ala.

It is highly unlikely that a nominee will wind up back at the unit from which he came. “Chances are, that the unit already has a first sergeant,” said Miller. “So that NCO is going to get trained and usually will go to another squadron.”



USAF photo

AFRC MSgt. Scott Daigneault (center) was on the front line literally and figuratively as first sergeant for the 506th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron in Southwest Asia. At left is SMSgt. Robert Griffin. ANG Capt. Christopher Green is at right.

As a special duty assignment, the first sergeant job is in competition with a number of other special duty jobs, all of which are looking for top NCOs. A first sergeant is critical in a squadron. “That’s why it is so important to keep the jobs full,” said Miller.

Some NCOs are fearful that a tour as first sergeant will slow their advancement in their primary careers and

delay promotions. The facts show this is not so. “I think any time you do a special duty,” said Miller, “any time you take on that extra responsibility, you become a better senior NCO.” She added that NCOs who have done a tour or more as a first sergeant are more likely to be promoted. The scope of experience gained as a first sergeant provides a boost.

A number of command chief master sergeants have, at one time, served as first sergeants. Moreover, McKinley, the current Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, served as first sergeant with four squadrons.

At last count, the Air Force had 1,190 first sergeants serving in assigned positions and was looking for another 60 to fill vacancies. Keeping the posts filled is difficult. Not only do the appointments require top-notch senior NCOs, they also last for only three years, meaning there is constant turnover.

Throughout its history, the US Army relied on the concept of the first sergeant, which was a formal rank. The Air Service, Air Corps, and Army Air Forces, all of which were integral parts of the Army, also embraced the concept. When the Air Force became a separate service in 1947, however, it broke with



USAF photo by Steve Thurow

MSgt. Rodney McCleod (l) does push-ups, while MSgt. Paul Martin observes, during a fund-raiser for the Brooks City-Base, Tex., community. Both are unit first sergeants.

Army tradition and made the position a duty specialty. In 1954, Gen. Nathan F. Twining, the USAF Chief of Staff, approved the use of the diamond in the V above the grade insignia as the first sergeant device.

Twists and Turns

In the late 1950s, the responsibilities of the first sergeant were reduced. The unit first sergeant became essentially an orderly room manager. In the same period, the Air Force created the E-8 and E-9 grades, further complicating the role of the first sergeant.

Superintendents in these grades routinely overruled the first sergeant's directions to airmen in junior grades. Numerous problems with the position prompted a study of the procedures for selecting and using first sergeants.

In 1961 the Air Force created the separate first sergeant career field (01090) and ruled that males in grades E-7 and above and females in E-6 and above could hold the post.

USAF photo



The first shirt is a top-notch senior NCO. SMSgt. Michael Brimmer, shown here at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, was AFRC's 2006 first sergeant of the year.

In 1967, Strategic Air Command's 15th Air Force opened at March AFB, Calif., what is thought to be the Air Force's original first sergeant school. Training included advanced management, personnel counseling, communications, and military justice.

In the early 1970s, the Air Force made a top-down effort to improve the first sergeant selection, training, and image. A headquarters workshop

How Did "First Sergeants" Become "First Shirts"?

The term "first shirt" has been applied to the duty for years, and it seems that no one can authoritatively document the origin. However, there are three main theories.

The first and most colorful version has it that federal troops in the early frontier days wore their shirts into tatters and eagerly awaited the supply wagon bringing new uniforms. When it came, the first sergeant, being the ranking enlisted man, got the first pick of the shirts.

The second theory is that the first sergeant, being the most senior and usually the most experienced of soldiers, often collected more decorations and insignia than anyone else. His shirt thus was the gaudiest—the first—in the outfit.

The third explanation is that when the Army troops removed their shirts to work in hot weather, the first sergeant continued to wear his because he was boss of the work crew and did not do manual labor. When anyone wanted instruction on some subject, he was told to see "the shirt."

recommended formal training courses and in 1972, the Air Force Extension Course Institute developed a first sergeant career development course. A year later, the Air Force issued AFR 39-16, "Selection, Training, and Utilization of First Sergeants."

In 2003, the Air Force again changed

The reason for making the job a special duty was largely a matter of perception, said Miller.

"The stigma used to be that when you became a first sergeant, you stayed a first sergeant," she said. "You never could go back or, if you went back, it was negative."

Another factor in the decision to make the job a special duty was the hard fact that it had lost its appeal to many airmen. The Air Force was seriously short of first sergeant applicants. The changes made the post more attractive to senior NCOs and improved recruiting.

Since 1973, new first shirts require training not only at the Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy but also at the First Sergeant Academy. There is little duplication in their curricula. At the FSA, security forces procedures, human resources intervention, and counseling skills are all covered in more depth than at the Senior NCO Academy.

Among enlisted troops, there is support for returning the first sergeant job to a career Air Force Specialty Code. The fact that so many command chiefs and Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force have served as first sergeants seems to bolster the argument for returning it to career status.

On the other hand, some first sergeants like the idea of making the status a rank, as in the Army. Past confusion over whether the first sergeant or the ranking NCO on a base was in charge of enlisted members lends some support to this thinking. ■

course, turning the first sergeant job once more into a separate special duty assignment. At the same time, it adopted the "three plus three" policy making the tour three years, with the possibility of a three-year extension.

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