



The Airmen Heritage Series
The Airmen Memorial Museum

PAUL WESLEY AIREY

FIRST CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT
OF THE AIR FORCE



ENLISTED HISTORICAL SUPPLEMENT



“Chief Airey never believed, as did some airmen at the time, that this would be a “phony position, a tool of the Air Staff... [meant] to placate the enlisted force.”

“I had enough faith in the system that [I knew the office] was going to be set up in all good faith to do something for the enlisted force... to try to make a better Air Force.” — Newly selected Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Paul Wesley Airey

CHIEF
PAUL W. AIREY

THE
FIRST
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SERGEANT
OF THE
AIR FORCE

by
William I. Chivalette
*Director of Operations
Airmen Memorial Museum*

Few enlisted people realize the great debt that is owed to an old chief petty officer with the Navy recruiting office in Quincy, Massachusetts. If not for him, Chief Airey would have become a Navy man, as many a young man did where Paul Airey grew up. It seems, in 1942, a young Paul Airey went into a Navy recruiting office eager to enlist and encountered the above mentioned chief petty officer. What he received instead was a bad time. He was told by the old chief that he couldn't fool with him that day.

“We want only men, we don't want to screw around with you today, come back later.”

With a complete change of mind, young Paul Airey went down the street and joined the Army Air Forces.

Soon after that, he entered a world of tough discipline and “brown shoe” diplomacy.

“Of course, discipline was harsh. It was what they called the old brown shoe days.”

During World War II, the Army Air Forces needed all the men they could get. They ranged in age from very young up to men in their forties. Additionally, there were wide variances in their education levels. They had men who could not read or write to men with college degrees. In that realm, there was more respect, or possibly fear of authority. Usually, just the threat of disciplinary action was enough for most but, occasionally, some would try the system.

“Spartan barracks was a form of punishment that was passed out for many reasons — failure to obey, [being] late for duty, missing formation, that kind of thing. You were put in a special barracks, and you double-timed to chow. You doubled-timed every place. You were restricted to a particular barracks, and your day was monitored. In other words, you did your duties, and the rest of the time you spent listening to lectures and double-timing and exercising. It was pretty damn rough.”

Although he wanted to become an aerial gunner, the Army Air Forces assigned Private First Class Airey as a B-24 radio operator, with additional duty as waist gunner. Following basic training at Atlantic City, New Jersey, the Army sent Paul to Scott Field, Illinois, where he completed Radio Operator School in June 1943. But, his training was far from over; the Army next sent him to Tyndall Field, Florida, for Aerial Gunnery School. After graduation, his class was sent by troop train to Salt Lake Army Air Base in Utah for crew assignment and refresher training in radio-operating. After a 10-day leave, Paul and his crew went to Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho, for B-24 transition training. After Boise, they reported to

Fairmont Army Air Base in Nebraska and became part of the 485th Bomb Group, which operated in the Mediterranean under Fifteenth Air Force in May 1944.

Up to this time, Paul Airey observed the war from a distance. However, it struck very close to home when the ship carrying most of his squadron across the Atlantic to Italy received a direct hit from German planes in the Mediterranean Sea and was lost with all aboard. Fortunately for Paul, he and the rest of the aircrews flew their aircraft over and were waiting in North Africa for their squadron to arrive and their base to be completed.

His first series of combat missions took Staff Sergeant Airey into Germany, Hungary, the Balkans, Austria and Romania. Additionally, he flew to Ploesti once, but not on the famous first low-level raid. Chief Airey remembers flak.

“Flak was the most frightening or the most frustrating thing because you could do nothing about it except watch it come at you. Many tales and jokes have been told about flak being so thick that you could walk on it; however, I’ve seen it so thick that it darkened the sky, almost blotted out the sun.”

The courage it took to hold formation and fly into a cloud of flak over heavily defended targets cannot be given justice in these pages. Flak took a terrible toll in American lives, with many thousands of casualties attributed to it. In 1944, Fifteenth Air Force flew **“Max Effort”** sorties with hundreds of aircraft, suffering losses of several B-24s per mission. Surviving these intense missions was often thought about but rarely mentioned. Chief Airey remembers thinking:

“The odds are pretty good. But, you multiply that by the number of missions you have to fly, and the odds start going down.”

At the age of 20, on a mission to bomb the Florisdorf oil refineries on the outskirts of Vienna, Technical Sergeant Paul Airey and his fellow crewmen were shot down on their twenty-eighth mission.

“The aircraft was hit by flak shortly after bombs away. I can recall the pilot feathering one engine and then the other. By this time, we were well across the Danube over Hungary. Of course, Hungary was an ally of the Germans. I can remember when the oil pressure in the third one started going down, the pilot said, Get out. If that third engine goes, this thing’s going down like a lead sled. We all bailed out.”

There was no hesitation on Sergeant Airey’s part; he had seen too many bombers spin out of control, the centripetal force trapping aircrews. During the long slow descent to the earth, he remembered tearing up his Morse encryption code and, undaunted, reaching into his pocket, finding his smokes, and lighting one up. By then, he could make out Hungarian farmers approaching from all over. As he landed, they were waiting.

“I got the hell beat out of me. They were irate, angry.”

Paul and his crew eventually became the prisoners of the Luftwaffe, as opposed to ground troops who became prisoners of the German Army. On their trip to Stalag Luft IV in Germany, they changed trains several times. Angry crowds gathered at each stop. The guards were not needed so

much to prevent the escape of prisoners, but instead to protect them from the angry mobs.

Technical Sergeant Airey was the guest of the Luftwaffe for 10 months. He survived a 90-day march from the Baltic Sea to Berlin before being liberated by the British Army in 1945 (see photograph left). By that time, he had lost a third of his 150-pound weight while a prisoner of war. He returned to the United States for a three-month recuperation

leave, after which he re-enlisted, something he considered while still a prisoner.

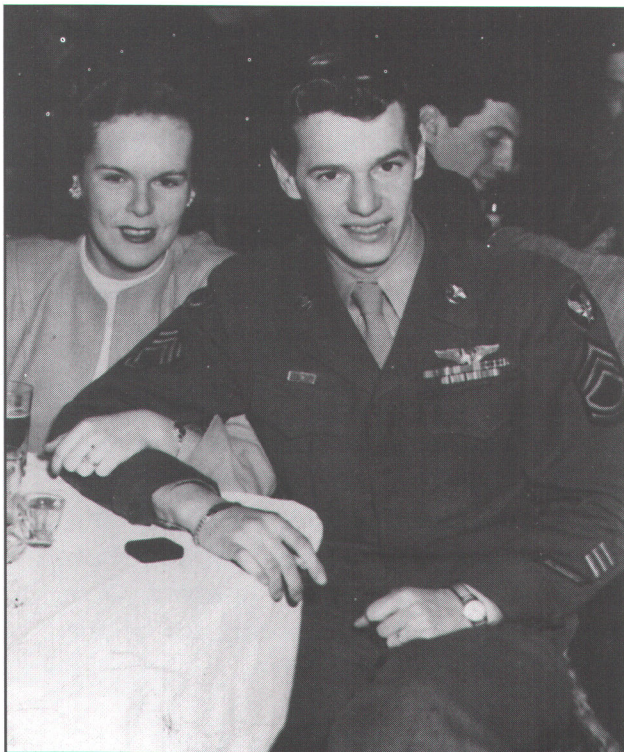
“Even as a prisoner of war, I was giving it much consideration about staying. I liked it. There was something about it I wanted. I came back from that recuperation leave and re-enlisted.”

Once TSgt Airey regained his health, he was stationed at Scott Field, Illinois, initially as a radio school instructor. At that time, Scott was the primary electronic



*TSgt Paul Airey in Belgium, May 1945, one week after his liberation by the British.
C/O CMSAF (Ret) Paul Airey.*

school for the Air Force. While there, TSgt Airey was promoted to master sergeant. In 1946, the Army came out with a policy that former prisoners of war might be promoted if they met certain criteria. Sergeant Airey fell under that criteria and was promoted. Later (15 months later), they determined the criteria was erroneous, reduced him in rank and wanted the difference in pay for the 15 months he was paid as a master sergeant. Additionally, they wanted it immediately and in one lump sum. Despite the fact he was promoted to master sergeant again on the first cycle of masters that came out, he still had to repay the lump sum.



Paul and Shirley Airey on their wedding night, February 2, 1946. C/O CMSAF (Ret) Paul W. Airey.

On February 2, 1946, Paul Airey married the former Shirley E. Babbitt, also of Quincy, Massachusetts (*see photograph above*). Meanwhile, the Korean War broke out and the Army sent Paul Airey to Naha

Air Base, Okinawa. When he arrived at Okinawa, Paul noticed the salt air and fungus due to moisture was taking a tremendous toll on the electronic equipment. He ordered equipment and set up a program to protect and treat the affected



Paul and Shirley Airey at the Military Ball, Scott AFB, 1953. C/O CMSAF (Ret) Paul W. Airey.

equipment. Despite the fact that Paul modestly declines credit, the Air Force claimed he saved them millions of dollars by enacting procedures that prevented the further deterioration of electronic equipment. The Air Force thought so much of those procedures, they awarded him the Legion of Merit.

Master Sergeant Airey returned to Scott Field in 1953, for a short time, as an instructor. Asked to volunteer to be a first sergeant for a short period, he did (*see photograph above*). However, he liked the discipline part of the job so well, 12 years later he was still in that career field. When asked about being a first sergeant:

“Of all the jobs I have had in my career, I think first sergeant was probably the best. I liked it. I liked the discipline part of it. I liked being able to counsel and lead. I liked the first sergeant duty.”

Paul Airey liked being a first sergeant so well that he spent over half his career as one. At Scott and later Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi, MSgt Airey was first sergeant of large student squadrons. When he served in Japan, he was first sergeant of a small radar site high in the mountains. Grand Forks Air Force Base, North Dakota, held a different challenge for Senior Master Sergeant Airey. There, he was first sergeant of a large Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron (CAMS). While at Grand Forks, he was also first sergeant of a civil engineering squadron. In those days, the Air Force did not have a first sergeant academy, so Paul and others learned on the job. In fact, only the major commands (MAJCOM) conducted formal professional military education for senior non-commissioned officers.

When the Air Force started discussing the possibility of creating the position of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Chief Airey was aware but not involved in the process. He, like most people at the time, followed the coverage given the discussions by the Air Force Times. As soon as he heard about the position, he thought:

“What a tremendous honor it would be for anyone to get that position or be appointed to it.”

The Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Mendel Rivers was, at the time, very concerned with the welfare of enlisted personnel. Inspired by the Army and Marine Corps senior enlisted

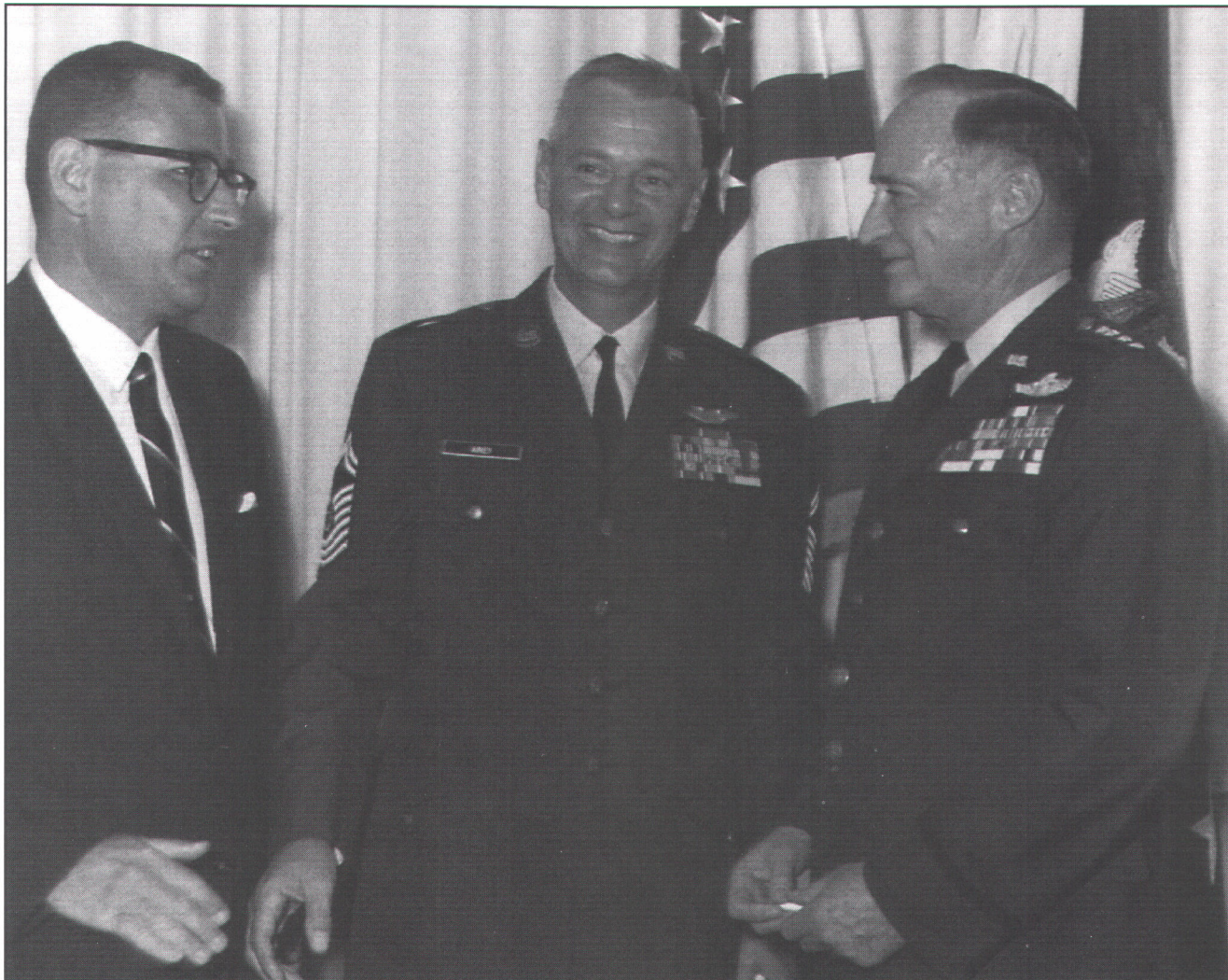
positions, Rivers eventually introduced a bill that would, under statute, create a senior NCO position for all services. “The term “Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force” seems to have appeared for the first time in the language of the Rivers bill. Until then, the Air Force had used the title “Sergeant Major of the Air Force” in its deliberations.”

Despite the fact it was apparent the Rivers bill would not pass, by October 1966, the Air Force officially acted to establish the position. Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell announced the position and explained the criteria and duties associated with the position.

“The man selected to fill this job will be used as a representative of the airman force when and where this is appropriate and will serve as a sounding board for ideas and proposals affecting airman matters. It is not intended that he be in the chain of command or on the coordinating staff, but he will have unrestricted access to the Air Staff.”

The selection criteria for the position was that candidates must have a minimum of 22 years’ service, with two years’ time in grade. They must be a high school graduate and exemplify the very highest standards of performance and integrity. Over 2,200 chiefs met the criteria out of the 5,900 chiefs in the Air Force.

After a board narrowed the field of 21 nominees down to three finalists, the Chief of Staff and Vice Chief of Staff conducted the final three interviews. They were CMSgt Conrad F. Stevens of Military Airlift Command, CMSgt Jefferson F. “Red” Marsh of Pacific Air Forces, and CMSgt Paul W. Airey of Air Defense Command. In January 1967, it was announced that General



Paul W. Airey being congratulated by Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown and Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell for becoming the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force on April 3, 1967. C/O CMSAF (Ret) Paul W. Airey.

McConnell selected Chief Airey to be the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.

“I will never be convinced that I was the most qualified or the best. I ended up with the job, so you go out and do the best you can.”

Chief Airey noted, during his installation ceremony, that the year 1967 held special significance since it was the twentieth anniversary of the Air Force as a special service. During that 20 year period, he said:

“I have seen many changes as we

progressed from simple airpower to today’s aerospace power. The enlisted corps has kept pace with that progress. I believe we will continue to progress, for it is pride and dedication that keeps enlisted men at their posts, not the lure of an easy life and a secure future. It is the desire to serve our country that motivates today’s Air Force.”

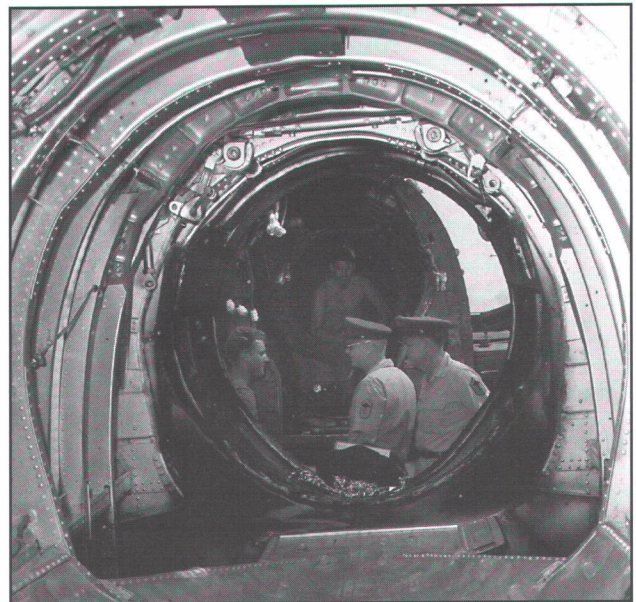
The position of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force was not one to be taken lightly. Chief Airey felt it was ***“90 percent common sense and 10 percent knowledge.”***

He felt, at that time, the position ***“could be the best thing to happen to airmen or the worst if the office becomes a front for the Pentagon or a lobby for malcontents.”***

His thoughts on the CMSAF position:

“I ran into a lot of people who said it was going to be a phony position. There were people who thought that. There were people who said it was something to placate the enlisted force. There were people who said they wouldn’t have it because it wasn’t going to do what they advertised it as. I couldn’t believe this. I had enough faith in the system that I liked to think it was going to be set up in all good faith to do something for the enlisted force, to make it an avenue of communication, to try and make it a better Air Force, which I, to this day, believe the job has accomplished.”

Not all of the Air Force’s senior leadership found the new post to their liking. One particular general officer actually admitted that he was against the creation of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force position.



Tuy Hoa AB, Vietnam, CMSAF Airey, center, with A1C Darling and Sgt. Segovis circa 1969. C/O USAF.

“Gabriel P. Disosway [Gen] was one of the top-ranking four-star generals in the United States Air Force. He was Commander of TAC [Tactical Air Command] when I was appointed. The first time I met him, we talked for several minutes, about 45 minutes, and he finally ended up making this statement,



Pleiku Air Base, Vietnam...A1Cs Tim Vasques and Ray H. Dunbar Jr. talk with CMSAF Paul W. Airey during his visit to their base, circa 1967. C/O USAF.

"I want you to know, Sergeant, that I strongly opposed the position you now hold. However, you have the job, and I will back you up." Here was a four-star general, one of the top four-star generals, commander of a major command, the Tactical Air Command, telling you that position you were now holding — he had fought, or words to that effect. It doesn't make you feel secure."



Cam Ranh Bay AB, South Vietnam, CMSAF Paul W. Airey visits with a patient, October 1967. C/O USAF.

Some even said General McConnell was opposed to it. Chief Airey thought:

"I don't know really how strong he was for or against it. I do know this, after a few months in office, I could not have asked for a better supporter. He was great to me and was always easy to talk to and always put me in a position whereas I felt comfortable in his presence. General McConnell was a very strong-willed, outstanding individual who spoke his mind."

The new Chief Master Sergeant of the Air

Force faced these problems and others head-on. In 1967, the Air Force suffered its worst retention rates in a decade. But, Chief Airey did not attribute it to the war in Vietnam, as was the popular analysis at the time. Rather, he thought numerous remote assignments, substandard pay, an unequal promotion system, and the excellent employment opportunities available on the civilian market were factors that drove retention rates down.

Chief Airey addressed the promotion situation and participated in the establishment of the Weighted Airman Promotion System (WAPS). Letters of complaint to representatives went from thousands to a mere handful. An indicator to Chief Airey that it was ***"by far the fairest, best, most equitable system of any of the Armed Forces."***

Chief Airey addressed many enlisted issues during his tenure, and represented the enlisted force (three-quarters of a million personnel) to Congress, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. His thoughts on issues that concerned him:

Commissioning NCOs: The Air Force should commission ***"as captains, even majors,"*** some 15 or 25 seniors and chiefs every year.

Senior Enlisted Advisors and Chiefs:

"We must pick the best chiefs for these jobs... someone the young airmen look up to and respect, ones who project the proper image... the type young airmen will approach with their problems."

Comparing chief master sergeants of today with those of 1959: ***"If I had to take a hundred chief master sergeants at random today versus a hundred chief master sergeants back in 1959 and***

compare them, there would be no comparison when it comes to overall education, overall attitude toward helping people, and in many other aspects. The hundred chiefs today would surface as better leaders overall, but this in no way detracts from the many great NCOs of the past.

On TOPCAP: Although the program achieved its objectives, it **“has outlived its usefulness. I am glad to see they are modifying it to let commanders give waivers.”**

His feelings on the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force's duties: **“I made a statement once, and it's been quoted — even misquoted — several times. I said that I wasn't going to be a clearinghouse just for enlisted gripes. I was there to help the enlisted force with their problems and to try and help rectify those problems if they were bona fide, but I still expected people with the everyday complaints to go to their first sergeant and their supervisor.”**

The position Senior Enlisted Advisor: Chief Airey disapproved of the title and tried to change it to a **“good strong military title,”** like **“Chief Master**

Sergeant of MAC” or **“Chief Master Sergeant of the 1st TFW.”**

On establishment of a Senior NCO Academy: **“The Senior NCO Academy was one thing I recommended. The leadership said, Absolutely not; there's no money for it. Then, lo and behold, General John Ryan, with a stroke of his pen, created one.”** He also believes attendance should be a prerequisite for promotion to chief. Of senior NCOs who retire rather than attend: **“Good. Get rid of them. We don't need them.”**

All-volunteer force: **“A failure. The defense of a democracy should be the responsibility of a composite of the people that make up that democracy.”**

Before leaving office, he had traveled more than 500,000 miles, and spoken before audiences

totaling more than 100,000. He made four trips to Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and received over 4,000 letters. And yes, “according to those who followed him, during 27 months in office, he built the position into one of undeniable importance and influence.” The First Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Paul Airey, enlisted pioneer.



RECOMMENDED READINGS

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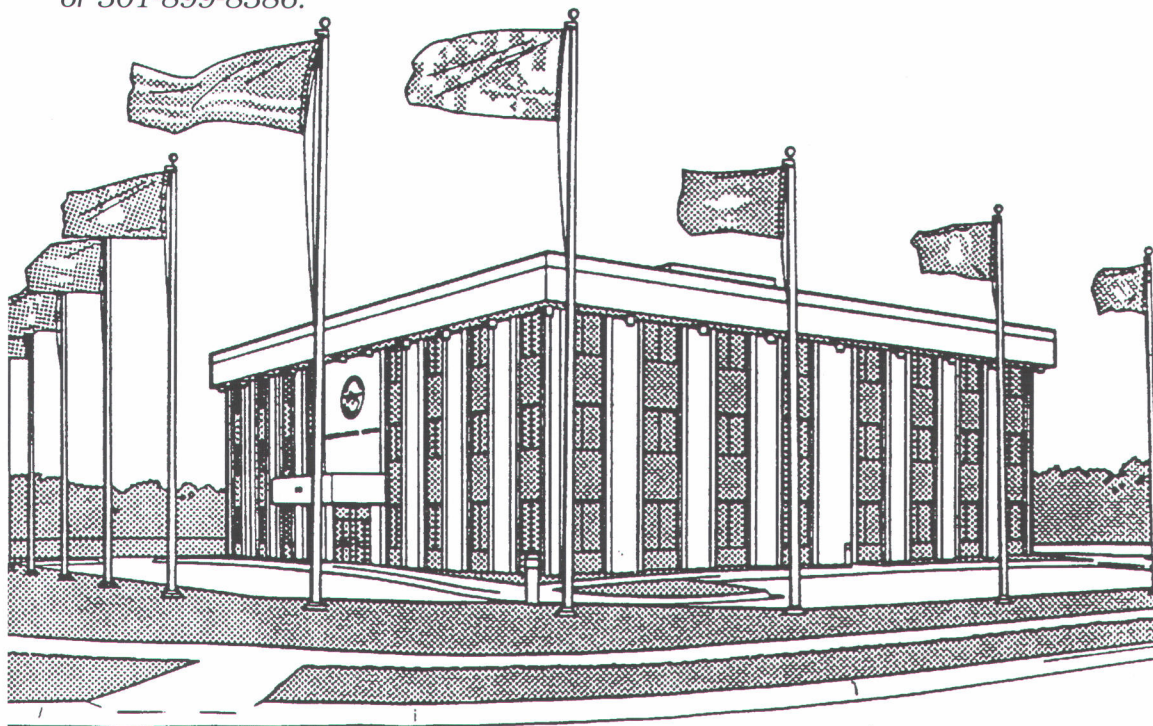
AIRMEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Founded in 1986, the Airmen Memorial Museum stand as a tribute to enlisted airmen who have served in the U.S. Air Force, the Army Air Corps and the U.S. Army Air Forces.

Located in the Airmen Memorial Building just eight miles from Washington, D.C., this museum is a maturing showcase of accomplishments. It is also designed to function as a research and reference center that documents and preserves the contributions of the men and women who served honorably but, until now, without a memorial or museum they could call their own.

This special series of compiled histories is the first effort by the museum, through its ongoing research activities, to make available to the public the story of America's unsung heroes — enlisted airmen.

The museum is open 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. weekdays and during specially scheduled events. For more information about the museum and its research project, contact the Airmen Memorial Museum, toll-free, at 1-800-638-0594 or 301-899-8386.



THE AIRMEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM
5211 AUTH ROAD
SUITLAND, MARYLAND 20746