

**James C. Binnicker**

*July 1, 1986–July 31, 1990*



James C. Binnicker became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on July 1, 1986. Ronald Reagan was President of the United States; Edward C. Aldridge, Jr., was the secretary of the Air Force; and Gen. Larry D. Welch, a former Air Force enlisted member, was the Air Force chief of staff.<sup>1</sup> Although the USAF enlisted force initially continued to grow while Binnicker held the top spot, budget constraints and the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which signaled the end of the Cold War, began a sustained period of substantial downsizing. The number of USAF enlisted personnel stood at 494,666 in 1986 and increased to 495,244 by 1987. By 1988, however, the number had dropped to 466,856 and stood at 430,818 by 1990.<sup>2</sup>

Born on July 23, 1938, in Orangeburg, South Carolina, James Binnicker was raised in Aiken, South Carolina, near the Georgia state line. Aspiring to become a pilot, he joined the Aiken Squadron of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) during his freshman year in high school. The CAP lured him with their recruiting tool—an orientation flight in a single-engine plane. That thirty-minute flight was all it took to put Binnicker on a course toward an Air Force career.

The Aiken Squadron conducted most of its two-week summer camps at nearby Shaw Air Force Base, where the cadets would live, eat, and march. “As I got into the Civil Air Patrol,” Binnicker said, “I found that I was very comfortable and enjoyed putting on the uniform and dressing up like an airman. The marching, the flying, the saluting, that was sort of my thing; I liked it. And then when we went to summer camp, the exposure to...the real Air Force...solidified that this was what I wanted to do.”

Being named Cadet of the Year in 1956, his senior year, was one of the high points of Binnicker’s time in the Civil Air Patrol because it earned him a scholarship to attend flight school. It also earned him the right to represent his state as a foreign exchange cadet in Great Britain. And it took him one step closer to his dream of being a pilot. But in 1957, after he signed up for the Air Force’s aviation cadet program, doctors detected a high-frequency hearing loss in his right ear, a dysfunction that removed him from the program. “I was disappointed and didn’t want to go back home and face the people that I had sort of thumbed my nose at—‘I’m gonna go off and be a jet pilot’—so I told the recruiter that I wanted to join the Air Force.”

Thinking he would not be very successful as an officer who was not a pilot, Binnicker enlisted in August 1957. He admits to entering the service with a chip on his shoulder because he was disappointed about not being able to fly. The hearing loss continued to disqualify him from several jobs, and he ended up in the personal equipment—later called life support—career field, installing parachutes and survival equipment in aircraft. Because it brought him close to the airplanes, it was the best alternative to flying.

It also put him on the flight line with B-52s and KC-135s and a maintenance chief named Roy Duhamel, who would become Binnicker's mentor and role model. "At the time I didn't care much for Chief Duhamel. He was always on my back about something." But, looking back several years later, Binnicker gave Duhamel credit for knocking the chip off his shoulder, "kicking his butt" when he needed it, and causing him to reenlist for the first time. The current Mentorship Program had not yet been established, but Binnicker's experience proved to him that mentoring works. He believes that had it not been for Chief Duhamel, he would not have reenlisted. For Binnicker, Duhamel was the perfect example of what a non-commissioned officer is all about.<sup>3</sup>

His Civil Air Patrol experience earned him one stripe after basic training, making him an airman third class when he arrived at the 96th Air Refueling Squadron at Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma. But none of his experiences had prepared him for what he would find there: "The barracks—we had two people per room and we shared a bath, which I thought was pretty bad at the time, but now, almost forty years later, we still have two people in a room sharing a bath." That, he said, planted a seed in his mind that there had to be a better way for enlisted people to live.

Despite what he calls the grimness of his first assignment, Binnicker was not scared away. He joined the Aero Club and lived the life of the typical airman, going to movies or hanging out in the dayroom of the barracks. He also took a job at the officers' club, first as a dishwasher and then as a waiter, to earn enough money to buy a 1949 Mercury for \$250—his "freedom ticket" to get off the base. He was also the typical airman at work, learning the duties associated with his job and applying his own ability to create a pleasant environment. His military bearing, dress, morale, and activities on and off base were attracting positive attention, and the officer in charge of his duty section was the first to document Binnicker's potential. On the very first performance report of a man who would become chief master sergeant of the Air Force, the lieutenant wrote, "This airman...could become an excellent supervisor and leader."

Binnicker stayed at Altus until 1964 when, as a married staff sergeant, he received orders to Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. He had already cross-trained into the air operations career field, where promotions came very quickly. He was promoted to staff sergeant because his supervisor would not allow him to attend professional military education. "I kept wanting to go to what we called the preparatory school back in those days, a precursor for leadership

school today,” he remembered. “I would see [students] marching up and down the street, and they had little red epaulet[s] on their khaki shirt[s] that indicated that they were student[s]. And I really wanted to do that. That was a holdover from my Civil Air Patrol days of marching and drill team. Plus,...I knew that attendance at that school would speed up the promotion process.” His boss, a lieutenant colonel, said that he could not afford to let Binnicker go and that he thought the school was a waste of time. When Binnicker tried “the old promotion ploy—‘if you don’t send me, I won’t get promoted,’” his boss said if that was all Binnicker was worried about, he would just promote him.



When a high-frequency hearing loss denied him his dream of flight school, Jim Binnicker enlisted in the Air Force in August 1957.

Obviously, promotions were received differently in the days before the Weighted Airman Promotion System was established in 1970. When asked how promotions were earned before WAPS, Binnicker said no one really knew. “[The promotion] was recommended by your supervisor and your squadron commander [based on] job performance and that sort of thing. That was the driving force behind WAPS, because no one knew what it took to get promoted.”

In Hawaii, Binnicker was promoted to technical sergeant and worked in 1502d Air Transport Wing operations, planning flights for all of the missions going into Vietnam. While working on a degree at the University of Hawaii, he had studied Vietnamese to fulfill his foreign language requirement because he thought it might prove beneficial to know the language of a country with which the United States was at war. He volunteered for service in Vietnam, but the personnel system rejected his volunteer statement and sent him instead to Grand Forks, North Dakota.

That experience soured his opinion of the personnel system, and his opinion did not improve when he received orders to Vietnam eleven months later. “My experience was moving from Hawaii to Grand Forks...only to turn around eleven months later and go back through Hawaii on my way to Vietnam. So I was mad at the personnel system for doing that to me and my family.”

It was in Vietnam, while he was working in the 22d Tactical Air Support Squadron from 1968 to 1969, that Binnicker first heard of the position of chief master sergeant of the Air Force. His original goal had been to make chief master sergeant by age thirty-five, but when he heard that there was a higher-ranking position, the thirty-year-old master sergeant set his sights even higher. Binnicker's Airman Performance Reports (APRs) began suggesting him for the CMSAF position within three years. In fact, fourteen of his next fifteen APRs would make the same recommendation before he was first considered for the position in 1983.

After his tour in Vietnam, Binnicker completed assignments at Robins Air Force Base, Georgia; Ching Chuan Kang Air Base, Taiwan; and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina. At Seymour Johnson in 1972, Binnicker undertook duties first as the base sergeant major in the 4th Combat Support Group and later as senior enlisted adviser for the 4th Tactical Fighter Wing. He left the base as a chief master sergeant and went to Bergstrom Air Force Base, Texas, as the senior enlisted adviser for the Twelfth Air Force.

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter established the President's Commission on Military Compensation and, on the recommendation of CMSAF Thomas Barnes, Binnicker became the military's sole enlisted member of the commission. However, on Binnicker's recommendation, representatives from the other services were later added.

Binnicker credits Barnes with a lot of his success because of the opportunities Barnes provided him, although Binnicker does not know why he was singled out. "He involved me in some things that gave me visibility that I might not have gotten otherwise," Binnicker said. "He's sort of my hero of all the former chiefs. I like them all, but I kind of point to him as the guy [who] had the most influence and impact on my career."

After serving one year with the compensation commission, Binnicker returned to his position as senior enlisted adviser at the Twelfth Air Force, before taking the same position for three years at Headquarters Pacific Air Forces, Hickam Air Force Base. But after more than seven years of senior enlisted adviser duties, he was ready for a change: "I called the Chiefs' Group at [the Military Personnel Center (MPC)] and told them that I was interested in finding a challenging job—I didn't care where they sent me; I just wanted a challenging job. They came back later and said that they had a position at MPC in the enlisted retention division." Soon, however, the Military Personnel Center commander asked Binnicker to head up the Chiefs' Group at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas. Although Binnicker was interested in that job, he was not certain he was qualified.

I felt it was important to remind the commander that, [although] I was working at MPC, I was not a personnel chief, had never been in personnel, and had always thought that being chief of the Chiefs' Group was the premiere personnel chief's position. [The commander said] he didn't have any personnel experience when he got to MPC, and pointed to his pilot wings and said, "Those are not personnel wings." And he said, "I know what

your background is and I want you to do it.” It was an experiment to try and bring a person from the field, not a personnel person, to head up this Chiefs’ Group. I did that for three-and-one-half years.

Binnicker credits both jobs at the Military Personnel Center with giving him the background and experience he would need as chief master sergeant of the Air Force:

I, like a lot of people in the Air Force, had some preconceived notions about personnel; I think personnel gets a bad rap because of the business that they’re in. They’re either moving you or promoting you or educating you, and those are things that are near and dear to everyone’s heart. So if you can’t satisfy everyone, obviously you’re going to have a bad reputation. The training, the exposure I got while working at the Chiefs’ Group, I think, [enabled me to] go out and defend the personnel system. When you’re standing on stage and someone is upset with the personnel system—either they didn’t get promoted or they didn’t get the assignment they wanted—it certainly helps...to be able to...explain the system...from the standpoint of having worked there and understanding the system.

In 1985, at about the same time that Binnicker’s assignment was ending at Randolph, the new commander of Tactical Air Command, Gen. Robert D. Russ, was looking for a senior enlisted adviser. Binnicker had worked for Russ at Seymour Johnson and jumped at the opportunity to work for him again.

When the announcement was made that CMSAF Sam Parish was going to retire, a message soliciting nominations for the position was sent to major commands, field operating agencies, and direct reporting units. The Chiefs’ Group compiled information packages on each nominee, and a panel of officers reviewed the candidates and narrowed the selection to three finalists. Each finalist was interviewed by Gen. Larry D. Welch, commander of Strategic Air Command, who was awaiting Senate confirmation of his own selection as Air Force chief of staff.

Binnicker and his wife, Jan, went to SAC headquarters to meet Welch. “It was a thirty-five-minute interview, very intense. The questions, I thought, were the kind of questions you might expect: ‘Do you have an agenda?’ ‘No, I don’t have an agenda, but I have a list of things that I would like to work on.’ ‘What’s on that list?’ The APR was number one, and he said, ‘I agree, but I think we need to fix the [Officer Effectiveness Report (OER)] because it’s more broke than the APR.’ Then we [worked] on that list of things that, if I were selected,...I would focus on.” Thirty-five minutes later, the interview was over, and Binnicker’s future was set.

Binnicker thought that the senior enlisted adviser from Strategic Air Command, who had already been working with Welch, was the likely choice. But Welch, now retired from the Air Force, remembers why he selected Binnicker: “At the time, my judgment was that he had a broader outlook on the Air Force and, maybe most important, he had a very clear view of the proper role of the most senior of the senior NCOs—that is, the chief master sergeants.” And at a time when the senior leadership was not totally satisfied with the role that chief master sergeants were playing, Welch wanted to make sure the man he selected would lead the enlisted force in the right direction. In Welch’s words,

We thought the role of chief master sergeants was to be absolutely in the lead of the NCO corps, and absolutely in the lead of the enlisted force, in terms of looking after interests and understanding what drives the enlisted force and being spokesmen for the needs of the enlisted force, and not...for the needs of chief master sergeants. That’s not a criticism of chief master sergeants as a whole because they’re very bright, dedicated people. Their role had just...evolved in a different way than we intended. So, in addition to having a very broad view of the Air Force as a whole, and having a very solid grasp of what drives interest the enlisted force—what we need to do to take care of and motivate the enlisted force [—Binnicker] also had, by far, the clearest view of the proper role of chief master sergeants. The chiefs had begun to evolve into this sort of separate class of people in the Air Force, and what we needed the chief master sergeants to do was to be very, very much in the lead in enlisted matters. And he was very interested in that.

One of the first orders of business for the new chief master sergeant of the Air Force was to familiarize himself with the Air Staff and let them get to know him. “If you’re working on an issue in the barracks, you don’t want to bog the Chief of Staff down with the inner workings of that process. You want to work with the staff over in the engineering world,” Binnicker pointed out. “Or if you’re working on a personnel issue, likewise you don’t want to bother the Chief of Staff or Vice Chief until you have come up with a final position, and then you go in and you say, ‘This is what we’ve done, and this is what we need to get done.’”

When he knew “who was who” and “what was where,” Binnicker was ready to tackle the Airman Performance Report, a system of ratings from one to nine:

It had become, in my opinion, a meaningless document because 98 percent of the Air Force had the same...[rating]. I was never convinced—nor am I today—that 98 percent [of the force] is perfect; and essentially that’s what we were telling them, that 98 percent of the Air Force is perfect. And when you give everybody the same report card, then you hurt the people who are truly the exception...[T]he old APR...was not a bad system. We had just abused it to the point [where] it was ineffective. If we had followed the regula-

tion and treated it the way it was designed years ago, then it would have served us forever because it was well designed. It had just [come to the point where] if you [didn't] get a nine, you were dead.

Welch agreed that something was wrong with the system. “We have a problem in the Air Force,” he said, “and that problem is that we have so few mediocre people that it’s hard to differentiate [levels of] excellence.” Binnicker realized that commanders were giving everyone a nine because performance was rarely average.

Welch told Binnicker that what he wanted to measure was *performance*, both on the Officer Effectiveness Report and the Airman Performance Report. Other things were still important—the whole-person concept, for example, but performance ought to be the focus of the rating.

From that direction came the new Enlisted Performance Report (EPR). It was expected that most people would fall in the “consider for promotion” block, or a three on a scale ranging from one to five. “Even in that rare environment of excellent people, you have to have a system to evaluate them,” Binnicker explained. So, based on the new system, Binnicker said, there would be a handful of fives (“immediate” promotion) and fours (“ready” for promotion), and a lot of threes. According to Binnicker, such an outcome “tells the board to promote these fives first, these fours [next], and then a big chunk of the threes would get promoted, as well. But certainly a clear message would be sent to the promotion board that this is the person you [have to] promote first, and it would be done.”

As easy as that all sounded, there was a lot of resistance to the change because, Binnicker said, “we didn’t educate the Air Force.” No one understood that the majority of airmen and noncommissioned officers deserved a three, and ratings on the EPR, like its predecessor, have become inflated. “Somehow we had come to think that if you didn’t get a report card all the way to the right [top marks], there was something wrong,” he said. “And I was just hoping that, over time, we would accept a report card that might not be all the way to the right.”

A system of performance feedback was also instituted with the new Enlisted Performance Report. Raters were directed to meet with their subordinates during the first thirty days of supervision, midway through the reporting period, and again after completing an EPR. “Feedback was something I thought was absolutely essential—still do,” Binnicker said. “It wasn’t done very well in the beginning, but I saw it as a tool to help supervisors in many ways. You’ve told them up front what your standards are; at midpoint you said, ‘this is how well you’re doing—or not doing—and then the report card.’”

In 1995, when Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald Fogleman and CMSAF David J. Campanale formed a panel to review both the report and the feedback portions of the evaluation system, “[the panel] essentially verified what we had done,” Binnicker said. “They made some changes that I thought were appropriate. It needs to be looked at on a regular basis, tweaked



and modified based on the needs of the Air Force at the particular time. I don't think we should go for another twenty years without looking at [the EPR]. I think it should be as dynamic as our Air Force is—ever-changing, always looking at it from the standpoint of, does it fit what we're doing today?"

With the evaluation system taken care of, Binnicker set his sights on admitting master sergeants to the Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy, which only senior and chief master sergeants had attended.

When I was a chief-selectee, I felt cheated because I had a strong need for [the information gained at the academy] a lot earlier. And I felt that the payback would be greater [if] we would expose master sergeants to this information. That's the beginning of the senior NCO corps. We call master sergeants senior NCOs; we include them in the Top 3; we call it the Senior NCO Academy, yet we don't send them to the senior school. The primary purpose would be to send the master sergeants earlier to take advantage of this new-found knowledge, and they would be better prepared, I think, to move into the senior and chief ranks, and take those positions of greater responsibility.

Binnicker favored giving people all the responsibility they could handle, and he noticed a lot of changes since the time he was an airman. Now, he said, "we give them more responsibility, we treat them more as...adult[s with] a lot more freedom to voice their opinion and to be involved in the decision process." As a result, he thinks the Air Force can attract and retain higher quality personnel.

Female and minority service members have also received greater responsibilities. Binnicker thinks their roles have changed "only about a thousand percent. We have, in fact, changed the way we treat both minorities and women. Not so much with affirmative action, but I think with the recognition that it's the right thing to do; the recognition that what we were doing in years gone by was, in fact, not the right thing to do, or at least not the right way to do it."

The most profound change may be noticed among women. Thomas Barnes was the first minority chief master sergeant of the Air Force, from 1973 to 1977, but there has never been a woman in that job. Binnicker thinks that things may be about to change. He said that, in the past, the Air Force had built what amounted to institutionalized sexual discrimination when it came to women chief master sergeants. "Female members," he said, "would get promoted up to a particular grade—usually a master sergeant or senior master sergeant—and then get frustrated with the system because they could see that they were not going to get the choice positions that other chiefs might get." But once that institutional discrimination was eliminated—at least in part—commanders started to select female chiefs for more prestigious jobs. When that happened, Binnicker said, "young women at the staff or tech sergeant level could see that, 'Hey, there is a reason for me to stay in the Air Force.' And they obviously are stay-



CMSAF Binnicker, along with other service senior enlisted representatives, testifies before Congress about quality of life issues.

ing longer, and doing quite well, I think, in being competitive for those jobs....[I]t's just a matter of time before we have a very serious candidate for Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force [who] happens to be a woman.”

When it comes to serving the enlisted force, Binnicker thinks the chief master sergeant of the Air Force should be sincere, credible, and honest, and should follow up on what he or she says. The chief should give the chief of staff input on a variety of subjects—input that the chief of staff can combine with pertinent input from other sources to form a basis for wise decision making.

Looking back at his four years as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, Binnicker believed that his two greatest accomplishments were the evaluation system improvements and the admission of master sergeants to the Senior NCO Academy. When asked how he would like to be remembered, he answered, “That I did my best. I would hope most people would say the same thing...and that's all you can do. That's all that the country can ask of you...that you do your best. That's how I'd like to be remembered.”

But General Welch, his former boss, remembered much more:

What I remember Chief Binnicker for is that I knew if there was a significant issue involving the enlisted force, a significant issue of the enlisted force that I needed to pay attention to,...Chief Binnicker would be in my office to tell me about it. And he would be the staunch advocate of the needs of the enlisted force, within the context of the greater needs of the Air Force. He was a marvelous spokesman for the needs of the enlisted

force, and a marvelous spokesman for the NCO corps. So I was never surprised. When I went to bases, talked to groups—NCOs, enlisted, et cetera—I almost never ran into any surprises. He also accepted the role of helping to lead the major air command senior enlisted advisers down that same very productive path. So, clearly, within the Air Force, he was the leader of the senior enlisted advisers.

Binnicker remains involved with today's enlisted force. Once a year, he joins the former chief master sergeants of the Air Force at the Pentagon for updates on current issues. He also visits professional military education classes and talks with students worldwide. Binnicker is currently the president and chief executive officer of the Air Force Enlisted Foundation, Inc., formerly the Air Force Enlisted Men's Widows and Dependents Home Foundation, Inc. The first thing Binnicker did when assuming his new position was change the organization's name. The foundation provides housing and services for widows of Air Force enlisted retirees. He also serves as a member of the Air University Board of Visitors and is a member of the Airmen Memorial Museum. He and his wife, Jan, live in Navarre, Florida. One son, Mike, is a junior at the University of Georgia. His other son, Carmen, is married and lives in Calhoun, Georgia, with his wife and daughter, Julia.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographical interview is based on material researched and compiled by SMSgt. Cathy Segal.

2. Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics, 2000*, pp. 65–66.

3. CMSAF Binnicker chose to submit a typewritten (or, more accurately, word-processed) response to his questionnaire (hereinafter Binnicker Questionnaire) as well as some editorial changes to the interview. A copy of the Binnicker Questionnaire and his editorial changes are available in the files of the Office of Air Force History, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.

4. Binnicker Questionnaire.