

Gerald R. Murray

July 1, 2002–Present



Gerald R. Murray became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on July 1, 2002. George W. Bush was President of the United States, James G. Roche was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. John P. Jumper was the Air Force chief of staff. The U.S. Air Force was actively engaged in the global war on terrorism, which began following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and would soon begin gathering forces for the war with Iraq. The USAF enlisted force numbered 292,500 men and women, 40,000 of whom were deployed during the Iraq war.

Gerald Murray was born in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, on January 18, 1956, and was raised in the small town by parents with strong Christian faith and conservative values. “My parents provided the love, morals, and upbringing that laid the foundation for my life,” said Murray. “They taught me the value of honest living and hard work.”

Following high school, Murray married his high school sweetheart, Sherry, and worked in construction for a few years. With the economy in a downturn, work was sporadic, and Murray was looking for other employment. He joined the Air Force in October 1977, thinking he’d “do four years and get out.”

“When I entered the Air Force in the late ’70s, the service was struggling with a myriad of problems—poor retention, inconsistencies in standards and discipline, and working hard to maintain combat readiness with an aging aircraft fleet,” he said. “It was a challenging time in our history, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to make the Air Force a career. Thankfully, I had some good supervisors who helped keep me on track.”

The chief enjoyed his field of aircraft maintenance and excelled at it. His first assignment was to MacDill Air Force Base, near Tampa, Florida. “Definitely not a bad first assignment for an airman,” he said. It was there that he met a senior airman below-the-zone board, and when asked what his goal in the Air Force was, said, “I want to be the chief master sergeant of the Air Force.”

“I really had put no thought into that at all,” Murray said. “I was trying to think of something that would show them I was motivated.” It must have worked, because Murray was promoted below the zone.



CMSgt Murray discusses policy with his staff.

After he spent three years on the flight line at MacDill, Murray's maintenance capabilities were recognized, and he was selected to be maintenance aircraft instructor. Murray describes his speaking abilities at the time as less than desirable. "I was a pretty good crew chief, but I couldn't stand in front of a group of students and speak at all," he said. Fortunately, an "old master sergeant" saw him in action, and recommended he sign up for a speech class. Murray did just that, but he "did terribly." The class instructor even recommended he give up his instructor duty and go back to the flight line. "Fortunately, public speaking is a

learned skill, and I've gotten much better over the years," said Murray, who, in the first year of his job as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, averaged approximately three formal speaking engagements a month and at least a dozen informal presentations to airmen around the Air Force.

Shortly afterwards, he and Sherry moved to Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, where he continued as a maintenance instructor. Their first son, Robert, was born there in 1982, and they enjoyed a tour close to their home state of North Carolina and the new baby's grandparents. In 1984, they were on the move again.

Murray continued in the maintenance field, and his next assignment was to Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, where he spent two years as a senior crew chief on "Victor (nuclear) Alert" on the F-16 aircraft. "Sherry and I did not have any desire to leave Shaw Air Force Base or to go to such a foreign place as Turkey," Murray said. "But that assignment turned out to be one of our best, and we made friends there that we continue to stay in touch with today."

Murray's next—and longest—assignment brought him much more responsibility. Over a six-year period, he managed and led an aircraft maintenance unit support section, a squadron mobility unit, and ultimately, became the production superintendent of a fighter squadron at Myrtle Beach Air Force Base, South Carolina. The Murrays's second son, Stephen, was born there in 1989.

In 1990, the United States started building up forces in the Middle East for the Gulf War. Murray deployed to King Faud International Airport and King Khalid Military City, Saudi Arabia. The production superintendent for over two years, Murray believes he was fortunate to be in the middle of the mission during Desert Storm. "It was extremely rewarding to be a part of history like that," he said. "I worked with some great leaders and learned a lot about how to lead, not just manage, people by watching how they motivated and led airmen into combat."

In 1992, Murray transferred to McChord Air Force Base, in Washington State, as the superintendent of a maintenance flight, but a base realignment closed the unit, leaving him with the next big challenge—setting up a new squadron in record time.

"In 1994, we set up a new A-10 squadron at Moody Air Force Base [in Georgia] in operational commission faster than any squadron since World War II, deployed it, and then proceeded to set records for some of the highest sortie production rates in the Air Force," Murray said. "Morale soared. We included our families and concentrated on teamwork while building the new squadron. The cooperation between maintenance and operations was outstanding. It was a great effort and example of what people can do together," he said.

After a three-month deployment to Kuwait with the A-10 squadron, Murray returned home to Moody two days early in 1996 to see his youngest of three children, Elizabeth, born. Murray was now a chief master sergeant. Yet another challenge awaited him back at home base, one that he was not thrilled about accepting at the time.

“Brig. Gen. L. D. Johnston asked me to be the wing’s senior enlisted adviser [later redesignated as command chief master sergeant],” said Murray. “First of all, I didn’t want to leave the flight line I loved; secondly, I wasn’t sure I was prepared for that responsibility.”

But saying no to General Johnston was not an option, and, given Murray’s desire to do a good job at whatever the service asked of him, he took the job. Murray began what he calls an “incredibly vertical learning curve.”

“No longer was I responsible for just two hundred-plus maintainers; I was responsible for, and to, every airmen in that wing,” said Murray. In 1997, Murray left for his third extended deployment, this time as command chief master sergeant at Sheikh Isa Air Base, Bahrain. After the seven-month deployment, Murray returned home. At that time, he questioned whether the sacrifices his family were making were worth the compensation he received. “I came home to Sherry and that little one-year-old girl . . . , plus my two older children, and had to evaluate whether I really wanted to continue this after twenty years in the service.” Gen. Mike Ryan, then the chief of staff, had just introduced the expeditionary aerospace force concept, and senior leaders and Congress were beginning to work to adjust the pay tables and compensation packages. “I saw what I believed to be good things happening, and Sherry and I decided we wanted to be a part of that,” he said. “We’ve never regretted that decision.”

Murray’s success as a command chief master sergeant at the wing level took him to the next level, and he was selected as the command chief for U.S. Forces Japan and Fifth Air Force at Yokota Air Base, Japan. From there, he was selected to be the Pacific Air Forces command chief in 2001.

After only ten months at Headquarters Pacific Air Force at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, Murray was nominated by the PACAF commander, Gen. William Begert, to be the fourteenth chief master sergeant of the Air Force. “I was honored that General Begert nominated me, but I really was not packing my bags,” said Murray. He began to realize that it might actually happen only when he found out that he was on the short list of four people to be interviewed by Gen. John Jumper, the chief of staff.

“When the call came from General Jumper, I was both excited and a little bit daunted by the tremendous amount of responsibility I was about to take on,” Murray said.

In his first year as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, Murray focused on issues that involved balancing the force. “Balancing the force is a necessity driven by demands that the global war on terrorism and Operation Iraqi Freedom placed on us,” said Murray. “All our people work extremely hard, but there are certain career fields and airmen who are more stressed than others,” he said.

The evolution of the expeditionary air force and a changed world following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, were catalysts for change during Murray’s first year as chief master sergeant of the Air Force. “Much of our manning priorities and authorizations were set for a cold-war, stay-at-home force,” he said. “We are now an expeditionary air force whose normal



CMSgt Murray is greeted by his daughter, Elizabeth, and wife, Sherry, upon his return from a deployment to Sheikh Isa Air Base, Bahrain, in 1997.

operations are away from home. We needed to evaluate our force and make changes where necessary to ensure our manning is consistent with the mission we perform today.”

In 2003, Murray pushed for and reenergized the NCO Retraining Program, which would move authorizations and people from less-stressed career fields into stressed career fields. Other tools Murray advocated to balance the force included applying critical career field status to E-8 and E-9 promotions and the return of Career Job Reservations for first-term airmen seeking to reenlist.

In Murray’s view, change and transformation have been a reality since the establishment of the U.S. Air Force as a separate service in 1947. Throughout his own career, Murray witnessed a shift in the posture of the force from an in-garrison to an expeditionary force.

“Early in my career, our mission was focused on the Cold War and readiness to fight another major conflict or world war. We prepared for this with a heavy exercise and inspection schedule,” he said. “In the ’80s, our force structure stabilized. In Europe and the Pacific, our bases were postured for major theater operations, with our CONUS [continental United States] bases ready to deploy forces forward. However, we were by no means an expeditionary force.”

Murray believes Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm changed that, as it was the beginning for our military to evolve and become more mobile. From that conflict, the foundations of the expeditionary aerospace force concept were laid. But it would take the service several more years and other combat operations to fully implement the concept, to provide

more stability for and ease the strain on USAF personnel in this new era of high operations tempo.

“We still have a ways to go to fully embrace the expeditionary mindset, Murray said after one year as chief master sergeant of the Air Force. “It usually takes an organization seven to ten years for a cultural change to really take effect,” he added.

A focused effort on force development by the chief of staff and secretary of the Air Force included the enlisted force, along with the officer and civilian corps. This gave Murray an opportunity to evaluate the way enlisted airmen are prepared for future leadership positions.

“Enlisted-force development will allow us to tailor the professional development of our airmen to best meet the expeditionary needs of the Air Force today and in the future,” Murray said. “Our enlisted force is the finest in the world,” he stated, “bar none. There is nothing we’re trying to fix with enlisted force development efforts. But at the same time,” he added, “just as the landscape of the world and our missions are ever evolving, it’s extremely important that we look at the way we train and educate our people to better prepare them to lead the force in the future.”

As part of the early stages of enlisted force development, management of chief master sergeants was moved from the Air Force Personnel Center to the Air Force Senior Leader Management Office, aligning the management and use of the highest enlisted members with the Air Force’s senior officers and civilians. “This move recognizes the important role our senior enlisted leaders play in our force today,” said Murray. “We want to make sure that we are using them in a way that capitalizes on their experience and education and gives them opportunities to grow in their leadership roles in our Air Force,” said Murray.

As Murray moved into his second year in the highest enlisted position, he set his sights on continuing to improve what generations of chevrons began and carried on before him. “Each chief master sergeant of the Air Force helped our force work through considerable issues and challenges,” said Murray. “Each of them are heroes in their own right in what they were able to accomplish for our enlisted force. I will continue, with the help of my family and my staff, to try to make a small difference, and to leave our Air Force a little better than when I arrived.”