

Frederick J. Finch

August 2, 1999–June 28, 2002



Frederick “Jim” Finch became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on August 2, 1999. Bill Clinton was President of the United States, F. Whitten Peters was confirmed that same day as the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. Michael E. Ryan was the Air Force chief of staff.¹ During Finch’s tenure, the United States faced one of the most traumatic days in its history—September 11, 2001, when terrorists flew hijacked commercial aircraft into the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania, killing more than three thousand people. In 1999, the number of USAF enlisted personnel stood at 286,169.² By the end of 2001, that number had fallen to 280,410; but, during Finch’s last months in office, the number began to rise for the first time since 1987.

Born on July 29, 1956, Jim Finch was raised primarily in East Hampton, New York. During his high school years, he attended a two-year vocational school, studying auto mechanics. He followed a tough work ethic during his teenage years, handling studies and two part-time jobs. As remained true, his work hours started early and ended late. Halfway through vocational school, Finch decided that there were better career opportunities in the U.S. Air Force.

Finch enlisted in the Air Force under the delayed enlistment program during his senior year in high school, coming on active duty after his graduation. When he entered the service in July 1974, he expected to do a four-year hitch and then move on. “I was from a small town and knew I had limited career options if I stayed there,” he said. “The Air Force seemed like a great opportunity to move out on my own, learn a trade, and see the world. But I didn’t have any long-term plans to make it a career.”

After he completed basic training and missile maintenance technical school at Lowry Air Force Base, Colorado, Finch was assigned to Homestead Air Force Base, Florida, and, subsequently, to RAF Welford, United Kingdom. His return from overseas put him back at Homestead, where he served as a missile maintenance crew chief and shift supervisor. After a couple of years working back in the “bomb dump,” Finch was offered a job as a noncommissioned officer professional military education instructor. He had no idea how significantly his decision to become part of the NCO professional military education team would alter his career and his future.

“I am proud my roots are in ‘ammo,’ and I really enjoyed my missile maintenance time,” he explained. “However, when I attended NCO Leadership School (NCOLS) at Homestead, I was very impressed with the faculty and found that many of their values and beliefs mirrored my own.”

One of the NCOLS instructors would make such a huge impression that Finch would later list him as one of three people from his Air Force career who were instrumental in building his confidence, setting high expectations, and giving him the tools and opportunities he needed to succeed. In describing that instructor, Finch said,

Rich Roller retired as a master sergeant. He should have made chief master sergeant and probably could have had he not been so concerned with providing opportunities for others. He was one of the most selfless people I’ve known. I worked very well with him, not only at the NCOLS but also later at Air University. He went from being my instructor to my boss to my peer to my neighbor, and now I count him as one of my lifelong friends.

After teaching at Homestead for four years, Finch was reassigned to the Leadership and Management Development Center (LMDC) at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. His first major task there was to develop a correspondence version of the newly created NCO Preparatory Course. “When the NCOPC first came out, there was no correspondence version for those who could not attend in residence,” he explained. “I was hired with the intent of overseeing the development of that correspondence course, and that’s how I spent my first year at Air University.”

While at the Leadership and Management Development Center, Finch worked for CMSgt. Jimmy Lavender, man he described as “a chief’s chief.” “He personified the word ‘chief,’ ” Finch said. “He was a great leader who cared for people, inspired both excellence and involvement, and set very high expectations. He was also a colorful speaker and is the source of some of the sayings I use today.”

After a year at LMDC and promotion to master sergeant, Finch transferred to other positions and served both as the director of the NCOPC instructor course and later as the non-commissioned officer in charge of the professional military education Evaluation and Analysis Branch. With eight years of PME experience and background, he was selected to be the Air Force NCO professional military education functional manager at the Air Force Military Personnel Center (AFMPC), commonly referred to as “MPC.” That was an assignment with an ironic beginning and ending.

“My first major task at MPC was to find a way to put master sergeants into the Senior NCO Academy,” Finch explained. “We developed and implemented new rules to do this, but the school wasn’t even large enough to accommodate all of the senior master sergeants at the time.” As Finch explained it:

...there were only 1250 seats available annually at the SNCOA (with 1175 for active duty Air Force senior master sergeants and the remaining for Air National Guard, Air Force Reserve, and sister service attendees). And, the Air Force was promoting far more senior master sergeants each year than the SNCOA could accommodate. Therefore, not all senior master sergeants had an opportunity to attend and selection was a “one-time” shot made in conjunction with selection for promotion to senior master sergeant. Those not selected for the SNCOA could later compete for one of a very limited number of seats at our sister service schools.³

The good news was that the Air Force approved a major expansion to the Senior NCO Academy, and, when construction was completed a few years later, the Air Force also approved a policy change requiring attendance before promotion to chief master sergeant. The bad news was that that change required temporarily suspending master sergeant attendance until the backlog of senior master sergeants could go to school. “My last task before I left MPC,” Finch said “was to rewrite the rules to discontinue allowing master sergeants to attend the Senior NCO Academy.” He added that both decisions were right, given the information and policies at the time. He also stated that

For the record, I believed then (and now) that the SNCOA should be available to all senior master sergeants and selected master sergeants (ideally those most likely to later become senior master sergeants). The policies of the time reflected our attempt to fairly distribute limited seats at the SNCOA.⁴

During that assignment, Finch was also involved with restructuring the PME program from four levels to three and with implementing procedures to create the Airman Leadership School. The restructuring aimed at matching professional military education with the three tiers of the enlisted grades—airmen, noncommissioned officers, senior noncommissioned officers. Finch helped to structure the new ALS curriculum so that it was written and managed by Air University but could be taught at the base level. With some hindsight Finch has concluded that

While some people believe “more” is always better, I think we have the formal PME structure about right. We have three formal schools taught at the airmen, noncommissioned officer, and senior noncommissioned officer levels at roughly the 6, 12, and 18 year point in someone’s career. And, Air University manages much of the operation of these schools. In recent years, however, other forms of enlisted professional development have evolved at both the MAJCOM and at base level. These programs enhance the three formal schools and leverage the capabilities and responsibilities of senior NCOs to

help become part of the development process for those who will follow them. Therefore, I endorse the current structure that mixes both formal and informal professional development for the enlisted corps.⁵

At the Air Force Military Personnel Center, Finch worked for CMSgt. Chuck Hasty, who would also become a lifelong friend and mentor. “Chuck was a respected leader and personnel expert who spent many hours explaining to me how the Air Force personnel system worked and why many of the rules existed,” Finch said. “He taught me many valuable lessons that continue to help me operate today as CMSAF.”

In September 1992, Finch was selected to be the commandant of the Pacific Air Forces NCO Academy at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska. The academy had a superb faculty and a sound educational program, but it lacked an adequate facility within which to work. “This was a facility that housed both an ALS and the NCO Academy, but didn’t even have an auditorium,” Finch explained. “The staff had to march the students to the NCO Club to conduct certain classes.”

Soon after his arrival, working numerous weekends and late nights, he and the staff constructed a state-of-the-art auditorium, including a rear-screen projection system. “You couldn’t have contracted this project out and gotten better results than what we did,” he said. “We had so much civil engineering talent on staff, coupled with a group of perfectionists, that they just made it happen!”

After less than a year of service as the commandant, Finch received a telephone call that would take him along another career path. He was called in to see Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Ralston, the commander of Eleventh Air Force.

The general said he was looking for a replacement for his departing senior enlisted adviser (SEA) and was curious as to the kind of chief master sergeant I thought he should hire. So I outlined the attributes of what I thought an SEA should be and gave him a list of those local chiefs who I thought would do a great job. Then he asked whether I might be interested in assuming the position, and I explained how I was the junior chief on base and already held a great job I enjoyed. I also added that I thought some of the other chiefs might have a problem with him making a young chief his SEA. He chuckled and said it wouldn’t be a problem for me or for him. That ended the conversation, and I went back to work.

A couple of months later, Finch had another call from the general, who replayed their previous conversation and said he had made his selection. “He simply stated I was his new SEA, unless I really didn’t want the job,” Finch explained. “I replied I would work wherever he wanted me...[I was] told I would start as the SEA the following week.”

This would be the first of two assignments Finch would share with General Ralston. The second assignment came in July 1995, when Ralston took command of Air Combat Command and again requested that Finch be his senior enlisted adviser or, as it would later be called, the command chief master sergeant.

During Finch's four years at ACC, the Air Force went through a trying period. Operational tempo, increased deployments, continued downsizing of the force, TRICARE implementation, retention, and frustration over a lack of money and spare parts topped the list of concerns on the minds of the enlisted corps. "There was never a lack of issues to address, although most...[focused on our] asking our folks to do more work without giving them the people, tools, and support to make it happen. Fortunately, many senior leaders took notice of the direction we were headed and began a campaign to turn the tables," Finch said.

Though, as noted below, nothing could completely prepare someone for the top enlisted job in the Air Force, Finch believed that his experience as a senior enlisted adviser provided him with some very valuable experiences.

Working as a senior enlisted advisor [now known as command chief master sergeant (CCM)] at both a NAF (numbered air force) and MAJCOM (major command) for six years was extremely beneficial. It provided an opportunity to become educated on the top issues affecting Air Force people. It also gave me insight into how HQ staffs operate and allowed me to understand concerns affecting various functional groups. It would be difficult to step into the role of CMSAF without having had some CCM experience. Since the CMSAF spends considerable time working issues with the MAJCOM CCMs (as a team), serving on the CCM team before coming CMSAF provided invaluable insights and perspective.⁶

From his position at Air Combat Command, Finch was nominated to be the thirteenth chief master sergeant of the Air Force.

I basically knew how the CMSAF selection process worked, and wasn't too surprised when I was nominated from ACC, since I had been the command chief master sergeant for a very large MAJCOM. However, I was pretty convinced I wouldn't make the cut since there were other chief master sergeants who were just as qualified and had proven relationships with the Air Force chief of staff.

Finch's prediction proved wrong when he was among the three finalists selected to undergo a personal interview. "The list...comprised...several impressive people, and I was quite honored to have been selected from among that group," he said. The three finalists went to the Pentagon for their interviews and then to dinner, and they were told to be near a tele-

phone for news of the decision. On June 4, 1999, Finch got the congratulatory call from Gen. Michael Ryan. “My first reaction was, great, I’m still employed,” Finch said, knowing that his replacement would arrive at Air Combat Command within a week, when he would literally be out of a job.

The chief had some idea of what to expect in his new position, but, he said, “nothing can ever prepare you completely for this job. You can’t really begin to understand the expectations until you sit in the chair. Then it’s like drinking from a fire hose, spending most of the time in ‘react mode.’ It takes a while just to figure out what responsibilities are in your lane to handle.”

Fortunately, Finch had his own experience to draw on, as well as some help from the previous chief master sergeant of the Air Force and from a great staff:

I’ve had a very close professional relationship with CMSAF [Eric] Benken for quite some time—before either of us were major command SEAs. It gave me great solace to know Eric wanted me to do well in this position, and I am grateful [that] he and his staff went out of their way to set the office up for success. It made the transition much easier than I have experienced in some of my previous assignments.

I have also been blessed to have a fantastic team in the CMSAF office, led by CMSgt. Dawn Rich. Everyone on the staff, including Tony Patterson, Mark Smith, Mike Gilbert, Rhonda Pelkey, Jack Harrison, and Beth Alber, brought a positive attitude and great expertise. They were the folks who actually worked all the issues from behind the scenes. I am especially indebted to Dawn Rich, who worked with me both at ACC and here in Washington.

During his first year in office, Finch traveled on more than two hundred days, visiting people in the field to learn about their issues and concerns. Finch recommends such an intense travel schedule for successive chief master sergeants of the Air Force. “I had to realize there is a delicate balance between spending enough time with the troops and staying in Washington, D.C., long enough to work [on] their issues.” Finch said. “It probably works out best to spend more time in the field during the first year so that you learn the issues you’re supposed to work on.”

Throughout much of his Air Force career, Finch has shared the experiences with his wife, Pat, a retired master sergeant and the first wife of a chief master sergeant of the Air Force to be a military retiree. “She...[fills] many important roles—wife, mother, friend, confidant,” Finch said, noting that Pat’s military experience was a significant asset during base visits. “Pat has a broad perspective and a solid understanding of what can and can’t be done, and why. Her military experience gave her greater credibility because people knew she had walked the walk.”

Finch's career path has taken several turns, from missile maintenance to PME instructor, to career field functional manager, to NCO academy commandant, to senior enlisted adviser, and then to chief master sergeant of the Air Force. He believes these varied experiences have made him a more valuable asset to the Air Force:

The more you experience, the better able you are to deal with others around you and in other career fields. You gain an appreciation of how everyone fits in the big scheme of things; you better understand the frustrations associated with their jobs and the difficulties they face on a daily basis. As you broaden your experience base, I believe you become a better educated airman and a more valuable asset to the military.

During his twenty-eight years of service, Finch has seen the Air Force make several changes in how it operates and how it accomplishes the mission:

The Air Force is constantly changing, which makes this a great career for someone who easily becomes bored with routine. However, restructuring our Air Force, as well as moving to an expeditionary mindset...[have] been the most significant change[s] during my...career. This change is huge because it will shape how we will conduct missions well into the twenty-first century.

Other highlights of Finch's time as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force include implementing Warrior Week, streamlining the selection process for command chief master sergeants, and creating a program designed to develop enlisted leaders for the future.

"I'm very proud of Warrior Week⁷ for the expeditionary mindset it instills in our basic trainees," Finch explained, "but all the credit for the program goes to the men and women at Lackland [Air Force Base] for seeing the idea through to fruition."

By streamlining the command chief master sergeant selection process, the changes "created a manageable pool of candidates,...[thereby] removing the need for a formal application each time a vacancy was announced," Finch said. "It eliminated the short-notice suspense that chiefs often faced in the past, and it...better prepared the candidates for their new duties by having them attend an orientation on CCM roles and responsibilities. It was a win situation for the commanders as well,...[because] they had greater flexibility in selecting a CCM."

In describing the Developing Aerospace Leaders (DAL) program for enlisted personnel, Finch explained that

DAL is a framework with which to take a conceptual look at the future and decide how we need to structure ourselves so that we're a viable force in the year 2020 or beyond. I

subscribe to the theory that if you want to improve the Air Force, then you must ensure the people who replace you have the ability to be successful. That's why I'm so pleased with the DAL concept and [with] how many of our key enlisted leaders have embraced it. It indicates we're becoming more proactive in how we work the future development of the Air Force enlisted corps.

Along with the highlights, Finch also noted a number of challenges he faced as the Air Force's top enlisted person. First was "moving the mindset within the force from a 'cold war' mentality to becoming 'expeditionary.'" One of the chief obstacles in changing the mentality was the sheer volume of change the Air Force and its people experienced in the last decade of the twentieth century, including new uniforms, new organizations, and new management styles. Finch had to convince them that the new Expeditionary Aerospace Force was not a "temporary concept." He believed that creating Warrior Week—which focuses on the deployment process and the EAF and takes place during basic training—was a good step in the right direction.⁸

A second challenge, also noted above, was more personal—balancing the time spent out in the field with working issues in the Pentagon and Capitol Hill. "It was a delicate balance...too much time in Washington risked losing credibility with the force...but too little time in Washington translated to limited input on pending decisions or limited advocacy of important initiatives."⁹ Not surprisingly, all of the chief master sergeants of the Air Force have faced this challenge and have struggled with it.

Finally, Finch found that "focusing enough attention on important projects and long-term initiatives was a significant challenge." As he explained it,

It was relatively easy to become consumed with the day-to-day problems and concerns affecting Air Force people. And, responding to e-mail inquiries routinely took more than 3 hours a day, every day. I found the best approach to this dilemma was to surround myself with dedicated professionals and give them the trust and support to handle the daily issues. I am thankful to have had a CMSAF office team who shared the same vision and worked together to set some significant changes into motion.¹⁰

In addition to his close ties with his staff, Finch also developed strong working relationships with the two chiefs of staff under whom he served. He described his relationship with General Ryan as "outstanding." He remembers him as "a great boss who immediately embraced me as part of the Air Force senior leadership team." He recalled that he and Ryan "had very similar views on issues so it was easy to stay in step with him." Finch had planned to retire shortly after Ryan did, but the new chief of staff, Gen. John Jumper, asked Finch to stay on for an additional year. Finch was honored by the request, and he described his rela-



CMSAF Finch discusses issues with CMSgt Teddy Wilson while visiting deployed airmen in Southwest Asia in early 2002.

tionship with his new boss as “professional and mutually supportive.” Jumper took office less than a week after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; circumstances, thus, demanded that he focus on the issues surrounding Operation Enduring Freedom. As Finch noted, “Although I didn’t spend as much time with him as I had with General Ryan, our sessions together were always positive and he continued to support the initiatives I had been working.”¹¹

CMSAF Jim Finch spent his three years in the top enlisted office focusing on the current concerns of the enlisted members of the Air Force and putting programs into place that will improve their future preparedness. As threats to our national security and to world peace change, and as the military responses demanded of our armed forces change with those threats, leaders who develop a future-focused perspective will be some of our most valuable resources. Finch made a significant contribution to ensuring that such leadership develops in the Air Force.

Finch currently resides in San Antonio, Texas, “simply enjoying time with my family and catching up on projects and activities I’ve put off for years.” He is not completely retired, however, as he is currently the co-chairman of the Air Force Retiree Council. He also remains involved on the boards of a few organizations associated with Air Force life. As a retired Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, he travels periodically to speak with Air Force men and women. He views “the primary role of a former CMSAF as helping the enlisted force gain perspective on events affecting them and supporting the current CMSAF as he/she tackles current challenges.”¹²

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographical interview is based on materials researched and compiled by the Office of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.
2. Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics, 2000*, p. 66.
3. CMSAF Finch responded to his questionnaire (hereinafter Finch Questionnaire) via e-mail. A printed copy of his questionnaire is available in the files of the Office of Air Force History, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.
4. Finch Questionnaire.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Warrior Week comes toward the end of basic training and affords the recruits a realistic exposure to the rigors of deployment as part of an expeditionary force.
8. Finch Questionnaire.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*