

Eric W. Benken

November 5, 1996–July 30, 1999



Eric W. Benken became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on November 5, 1996. Bill Clinton was President of the United States, Sheila E. Widnall was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman was the Air Force chief of staff.¹ In 1996, the number of USAF enlisted personnel stood at 308,608. By 1999, the number had dropped to 286,169.²

Eric Benken was born on August 20, 1951, and grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. He thought his future was securely rooted in the Midwest until his parents moved to Houston, Texas, in 1967, during his junior year in high school. After spending three months in Houston, Benken told his parents that he did not like the school there and that he wanted to return to Cincinnati. He went back and lived with his grandmother and finished his senior year of high school there.

Following graduation in 1969, he rejoined his parents in Houston, but he could not find a job. The war in Vietnam made employers reluctant to hire young men who were likely to be drafted just about the time they finished job training. “So I wound up working in a car dealership,” Benken said, “where I was just washing cars and doing odd jobs...taking out the trash, and things like that. With overtime, I was making about \$60 a week.”

After much frustration trying to find a secure niche in society, Benken found an opening. “It was a hot summer day,” he recalled, “and my mother came to pick me up in my ’62 Chevy, [which] had no air conditioning. As we were driving home, we got stuck in a traffic jam in downtown Houston. We were stuck in front of the Federal Building, and there was a poster or sign that read, ‘Join the Air Force.’ I told my mother, ‘You know, I think I’m going to get out of Houston, Texas. I’ll take the bus home. See you later.’” He enlisted on the spot.

After basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, Benken was placed in casual status awaiting assignment to a technical training school. He was designated for training as an administrative specialist, Air Force specialty code 702, and ordered to Ellington Air Force Base, only twenty-five miles from his home in Houston. “I joined the Air Force to get out of Houston, and the Air Force was sending me right back,” he quipped.

At Ellington, Benken’s first supervisor was MSgt. Elizabeth Quatowski. She had a major influence on his life and subsequent career:

In September 1971, A1C Eric Benken was deployed to Detachment 1 of the 834th Air Division at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam—a brief but intense experience.



At that time, we had very few females on active duty. So it was unusual to have a female supervisor. But I say, to this day, that she was probably the best supervisor that I ever had. She did everything right. She gave me feedback, she told me when to get a haircut, told me when I was out of uniform and to get it right. She made sure that I was properly trained, had my quarters in good shape, and all the things we expect a supervisor to do. It put me on the right path.

She also convinced him that “women could succeed in the vast majority of career paths offered by the Air Force.”³

Nine months into his tour of duty at Ellington, Benken received orders to the 314th Tactical Airlift Wing, Ching Chuan Kang Air Base, Taiwan, where his perspective on the Air Force would change.

When I was stationed...in Taiwan, we lived in some very lousy...conditions. We lived in some open-bay dormitories. I never saw my first sergeant. I didn't know who my first sergeant was. I didn't know who my commander was. We lived in some horrid conditions, and nobody ever came and looked at it. We lived in open bay hooches with no air conditioning or heating. We slept in our fatigues in winter because we were issued only one blanket and because the doors were broken, the wind whistled through the barracks. There were lots of fights and drug use was rampant. Nobody ever came and made it better.

I always said that if I became a chief master sergeant or if I became a senior enlisted adviser, my boss had to be somebody that I could freely talk to, and someone...[to whom] I could show the bad as well as the good.

While assigned to the 314th, Benken was deployed for a few months to Detachment 1 of the 834th Air Division at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam. There he provided administrative support for the base maintenance unit. The experience was brief but intense, with a rocket attack, attempted sapper infiltration of the base, and a shooting just outside the main gate. He also celebrated his twentieth birthday there, with a C-ration pineapple upside-down cake and a can of Schlitz beer. Recalling his time in Vietnam, Benken said,

Many of the folks who served during that era were part of our nonvolunteer force. We had tremendous problems with drugs and alcohol. I also learned that anyone, regardless of [specialty code], can be called upon to carry a weapon. Even as an admin specialist, I was placed on a detail to guard weapons and ammunition on a flatbed truck while we moved them from one location to another. I wasn't trained and had no idea what I was doing. It could have turned out to be a bad day. The lesson for today's Air Force is that we must all be trained in force protection.

From Taiwan, Benken was assigned to the 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron at Bergstrom Air Force Base, Texas, where he spent six years. He next served as the executive noncommissioned officer to the commander of the 314th Air Division at Osan Air Base, South Korea. "That tour," he remembered, "and a visit to the 38th parallel, where you stare communism in the face, deepened my appreciation for the Air Force mission and our way of life in America."

In November 1979, Benken was reassigned to Bergstrom Air Force Base as the noncommissioned officer in charge for the deputy commander for resources administration, and as the noncommissioned officer in charge of the Twelfth Air Force Command Section. In 1983, he was assigned to the Tactical Air Warfare Center at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, as the noncommissioned officer in charge and deputy chief of staff, aircrew training devices administration.

"It was a great assignment," said Benken, who by then was a master sergeant. But he had seen Asia and several places in the United States, so he volunteered to go to Europe. He received a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assignment at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe (SHAPE) in Belgium. He worked in the directorate of operations as the administrative officer, with seventy-three administrators working under him. There were members of sixteen nations working together at SHAPE—Greeks, Turks, Italians, Ger-

mans, Dutch, Norwegians, Britons, and others—plus the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. The opportunity to work with people from such a range of cultures taught Benken a great deal.

While at SHAPE, Benken met and worked for Maj. Gen. James L. Jamerson, the assistant chief of staff for operations. Jamerson would soon earn his third star, move on to United States Air Forces in Europe headquarters as the vice commander, and would then become the Twelfth Air Force commander at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base near Tucson, Arizona. While in that last assignment, Jamerson asked Benken to be his senior enlisted adviser. As Benken recalled that assignment,

I had hoped that I would start at the wing level and be a wing senior enlisted adviser. That was a goal that I had in the back of my mind. Unfortunately, I never got the opportunity to be a wing senior enlisted adviser. I went straight to a numbered Air Force. And the numbered Air Force had changed dramatically... We were doing all kinds of missions, [including] counterdrug operations and things in South America. Visiting these remote counterdrug sites in South America gives you an appreciation for...[our] war on drugs. Our troops were living in remote jungle locations with sand bags and concertina wire. They could have been attacked by members of a drug cartel at any moment. I was very proud of what our troops were doing in the fight against drugs—as Americans we should all be proud of what our troops are doing.

Benken noted that at that time the Twelfth Air Force had ten wings. The initial challenge, he said, was pulling the wings together into a cohesive entity through the wing senior enlisted advisers. Benken made sure those advisers understood that he was available to them when they needed three-star intervention. He believes that higher headquarters people exist to support the wings, because those are the warfighting entities.

Benken had been at the Twelfth Air Force for about a year when Jamerson was promoted to general and given the command of U.S. Air Forces in Europe. Again he wanted Benken to accompany him to the new post. Benken and his wife, Johnne, had not fully unpacked their household goods from the last transfer, and they found themselves having to sell a house they had just bought. It was challenging, but the senior enlisted adviser assignment at Ramstein, Germany, was worth it. Benken remembered that tour this way:

Ramstein was probably my favorite tour...we were extremely busy. We were at the tip of the spear—operations like Joint Endeavor, Provide Promise, Provide Comfort, and Deliberate Force kept us hopping. The tremendous people of U.S. Air Forces Europe—augmented by tremendous people from the Air National Guard and Reserve forces and folks from bases around the world—made it all happen. There were very proud moments for the command and the Air Force. It was a great command. We had gotten down to about



CMSAF Eric Benken and his wife, Johnne, met President Bill Clinton at the Pentagon.

six main operating bases from the height of the Cold War and had downsized tremendously. At the same time we were doing all kinds of peacekeeping missions over there. So we had people who were very heavily tasked and working extremely hard.

While at USAFE, Benken crafted the NCO Professional Development Seminar, which was an effort to fill the career education void for staff sergeants between Airman Leadership School and the Senior NCO Academy. At his urging, especially after he became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, the concept has caught on, and seminars now exist at nearly every base in the Air Force. Benken is a proponent of professional military education, which he lauds for its structure and for the sound leadership tools it provides. But he believes that the Air Force has a responsibility to develop its younger noncommissioned officers professionally. In fact, he believed that his fellow chief master sergeants of the Air Force “would agree that professional military education is the key to our success as professional noncommissioned officers.” Not only did Benken recognize the value of professional military education for the USAF enlisted force as a whole, he also saw its value clearly in his own career development.

For me, NCO Leadership School, the NCO Academy and Senior NCO Academy were superb experiences. They offered the opportunity to “get away” from the day-to-day grind. They were a re-bluing experience—a chance to re-dedicate yourself to your service and to your nation. I learned a lot—and took what I learned back to my workcenter and became a better leader because of the experience.⁴

During Benken's time in Europe, the Air Staff developed a quality of life strategy by asking first sergeants and commanders what things were important to them. Among the responses received were such issues as pay and compensation, health care, and operations tempo.

Also during that period, Benken was fortunate to witness many changes in geopolitical and sociological status across Europe. He recalls the experience of being in Europe when the Berlin Wall was pulled down and considers the 1989 end of the Cold War to be the most significant event of the twentieth century, beyond the two world wars. "It caused all of the nations to begin to reassess their commitments to NATO—from a military and monetary standpoint," he said. Benken described how situations changed dramatically:

I will tell you that being at SHAPE headquarters, which was the military arm of NATO,...we were knee-deep in war plans. We were ready to fight the Russians in the Fulda Gap. We were ready to launch [intercontinental ballistic missiles] at each other; prepared for, potentially, the third world war; all that kind of thing. All of a sudden, when the Wall came down, things came to a...halt. We were looking around saying, "Geez, what do we do now? The big crisis of the world is over."

That was the beginning of downsizing, obviously. We probably would have ended up about right in terms of size and everything except that we started additional rotations. We started the peacekeeping operations and the disaster relief, while the force was getting smaller.

During his time at USAFE, Benken worked for three formidable commanders—Gens. Jim Jamerson, Richard E. Hawley, and Michael E. Ryan. Benken remembers all three men as great listeners. He said that hours were spent discussing enlisted issues—the bad news as well as the good—and that every time one of those men was going to make any decision, he asked first, "How is it going to affect the troops? What's going to be the impact on our enlisted corps?"

Shortly after General Ryan took the reins of United States Air Forces in Europe, CMSAF David Campanale announced his plans to retire, and Benken found himself in line for the most prestigious job open to an enlisted member of the U.S. Air Force. He had never aspired to the position and was apprehensive. He had always avoided jobs at the Pentagon and never really wanted to work there. But Ryan insisted on submitting the recommendation.

Benken and his wife, Johnne, traveled to Washington, D.C., for an interview with Gen. Ronald Fogleman, and Benken often jokes that the only reason he got the job was that Johnne did so well answering Fogleman's questions. "She's a trooper," he said. "She had to take care of outprocessing in Germany because I had to come [to] Washington directly upon selection. She's the one...[who] shipped all the household goods. She did all of that herself—with a lot of help from a lot of people in USAFE. She's been the anchor at home."

It took Benken several months to grow accustomed to the workings of the Pentagon and to looking at the Air Force from a macro level. And he no longer was acting on policy handed down from above: as the enlisted corps' representative to the secretary of the Air Force and the chief of staff, he was developing policy that would be implemented servicewide.

One such policy, and one he ranks among the most significant accomplishments during his tenure, was changing the title of senior enlisted adviser to command chief master sergeant, or CCM. With that change came a new, distinctive insignia that identifies the command chief master sergeant to the troops. As Benken explained, the change grew out of misuse and confusion:



Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Benken and his daughter Erika

It was a concept that had been discussed on numerous occasions over the years. The term senior enlisted adviser was merely a description and had little military significance. It became overused, and we had a lot of people who had the title but weren't assigned to the 9E000 position. Today, there is nothing ambiguous about command chief master sergeant. The troops know who the CCMs are and what they represent[—that is,] the commanders' policies at the wing, numbered Air Force, and major command levels.

Benken readily admits that developing policy is not done alone behind a desk in a corner of the Pentagon. Rather, it is a team effort that has to involve the major command (MAJ-COM) CCMs. They represent the force, and, to be able to work collectively, they have to have a say in the process. He also believed that he had great support from the two chiefs of staff under whom he served. He described General Fogleman as a man of great integrity and said that the enlisted force admired him “for taking a tough stance on issues.” Benken had worked with General Ryan at USAFE as his senior enlisted adviser. Benken credited Ryan with taking a number of important initiatives, including working to improve attitudes toward and access to mental health facilities. Ryan also told Benken that he was deeply committed to enlisted professional military education, telling him that he “would sacrifice F-22s to retain 100% in residence training for enlisted PME at the ALS and NCOA levels—and that

technical training would continue to be in residence.” Benken concluded, “Both of these men cared deeply for our enlisted force—and did everything within their power to improve quality of life and support technical training and professional military education.”⁵

During Benken’s tenure as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, the service faced a number of significant challenges, including the evolving Air Force missions, health care, and modernizing the force in a limited-budget context. The chief has described the challenges this way:

The fact that we have five-level shortages and are seeing some retention problems doesn’t surprise me. We have an economy that’s very robust. The desert rotations have kind of become a millstone around our necks in that we’re doing those all the time. We’re still kind of fighting Cold War scenarios and we are transitioning to an expeditionary Air Force. We no longer have that forward presence anymore.

Health care had to change because of the downsizing. TRICARE had to come on board, which really kind of began in 1995. We’ve tremendously reduced our infrastructure. Military treatment facilities can no longer take care of the nearly nine million or so people...[who] are eligible for health care. TRICARE was the answer.

We worked to bring on the F-22. It’s time to do that, because our weapon systems are aging. We have spare parts issues. Our crew chiefs are forced to deal with that. We’re cannibalizing more aircraft than normal.

Further, Benken believed that the last half of the last half of the 1990s was a “very volatile time for our Air Force and the Armed Forces as a whole.” In addition to the issues of retention, medical care, and lack of spare parts mentioned above, according to Benken, the Air Force faced a number of other issues. For example, due to Congressional action in 1986, the retirement system had changed: now depending on when you came on active duty, you received either 50 percent of base pay at twenty years under the old system or 40 percent under the new system. Benken believed that the Air Force lost personnel at the ten-year mark because of that. It was no longer worth staying to twenty years for the retirement. And the service was unable to act quickly to provide incentives to keep people in critical career fields.⁶

The way the Air Force trained its new recruits also became an issue during Benken’s tenure. Some in Congress began to advocate separating men and women during basic training, a notion Benken found “ridiculous.” The Air Force had been training men and women together since 1973. Despite a record of success, two separate and hostile commissions investigated gender-integrated training. Benken and his counterparts in the other services testified before the commissions. They all argued that the services had to make their own decisions about training. Further, Benken believed that separate training would be unequal

training and that it would be “wrong.” As a result of the strong arguments provided, the commissions were unable to force this change on the services. Though Benken believed that the service’s success in fighting off separate training represented another of the significant accomplishments of his time in office, he also realized that the issue might arise again. He stated,

I honestly believe that there are some in Congress that would have us return to the days when men went to the firing range and women would go to a cosmetics class. The reality is, women serve in 99.4% of Air Force career fields and make up roughly 25% of our new recruits. To this day, I believe that those opposed to gender-integrated training have hidden agendas—especially when they turned down the offer to visit our training locations and speak to trainers and trainees. I hope this issue is forever put to rest, but to believe it won’t return as an issue would be naïve.⁷

The most difficult challenge facing Benken was the fact that the USAF culture had to change in the late 1990s. Since gaining its independence as a service in 1947, the U.S. Air Force had been a cold war, garrison force. The service now had to become an expeditionary force. This was, as Benken put it, “a radical departure from the way we were doing business.” As chief master sergeant of the Air Force, he said, “I knew my role would be to help change the culture of the enlisted force to meet his [General Ryan’s] vision.” Benken realized that the late 1990s proved a difficult time to try to bring about a significant culture change. He noted that many of the issues listed above—including a lack of spare parts, changes in the retirement system, and the strong economy—were making a military career less appealing. Also, the media seemed filled with negative images. As he recalled, “During visits to bases our troops would express lots of dissatisfaction with what was going on in Washington with politicians. They couldn’t understand a declining defense budget while our missions and deployment taskings were on the rise.” However, he believed that a number of important steps were taken. First, the Air Force implemented Warrior Week⁸ at basic training. Further, the curriculum at the First Sergeants Academy was changed to focus on deployments and the issues created by deployments. He believed that “we now view ourselves as mobile warriors—much more so than we have in the past.”⁹

Despite the challenges, Benken does not predict “gloom and doom” for the Air Force. “Today, we have the best Air Force we’ve ever had,” he said. “The troops today, when they come out of basic training, are just phenomenal. I’m very, very proud of them. I’m very proud of those training processes—both basic military training and technical school.” He warns, however, that people need to keep an eye on the future: “We need to make sure that our professional military education is geared properly for going into the next century and the changes that we’re going to have to make. We need to take our force to a higher level. The

concept of airmanship and professionalism, and treating each other with dignity and respect, should be foremost.”

Benken tries to impress this on others who are influencing the next generation of Air Force leaders: “That’s what I tell brand-new chiefs, and in particular, brand-new senior NCOs. When you do something, it has an impact. People are watching you all the time. They’re watching your deeds, and they’re listening to what you say, and it’s very important that you do the right thing.”

He sees the efforts of the succession of chief master sergeants of the Air Force in terms of football. “You pick up the ball and you run with it for awhile, and then it’s no longer your turn. Then somebody else runs it. We keep taking it a little bit further down the field. Eventually, maybe we’ll get it over the goal line. But I think that’s what this position is all about. It’s building on the past and trying to take it into the future.”

Benken is currently the Air Force programs manager for USAA, a financial services organization that serves military members and their families. He continues to travel for the Air Force, typically as a guest speaker for a variety of functions. He also served as the cochairman of the Air Force Retiree Council for three years after his retirement and continues to serve on the board of directors for the Airmen Memorial Foundation. He resides in San Antonio, Texas, with his wife Johnne, daughter Erica, and Dusty the Wonderdog.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographical interview is based on material researched and compiled by SMSgt. Dave Diehl, SMSgt. Dale Warman, and MSgt. Jack Harrison, plus some editorial revisions suggested by CMSAF Benken.

2. Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics, 2000*, p. 66.

3. CMSAF Benken chose to submit typewritten answers to his questionnaire (hereinafter the Benken Questionnaire). A copy of his questionnaire is available at the offices of the Office of Air Force History Support Office, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.

4. Benken Questionnaire.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. See CMSAF Finch’s biography below.

9. Benken Questionnaire.