

David J. Campanale

October 26, 1994–November 4, 1996



David J. Campanale became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on October 26, 1994. William Jefferson 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 The post–Cold War drawdown continued during Campanale’s watch with the number of enlisted members falling from 341,317 in 1994 to 308,608 in 1996.² At the same time, though, the operational tempo increased, placing great strain on the Air Force and its personnel.

The youngest of three children, David Campanale was born in 1952 and raised in the inner city of Worcester, Massachusetts. He graduated from Worcester’s North High School in 1970. As Campanale recalled, neither goals nor expectations took him to the Air Force:

I came in simply because, as I graduated from high school, I was one of those kids who thought they had the world by the throat. I was a good athlete, reasonably smart in school, had a girlfriend. Life was grand. But everything fell apart, and I quickly realized I hadn’t properly planned for the rest of my life. I liked playing sports and thought about pro baseball, but it didn’t work out. I went to a [baseball] training camp and worked out, but nothing happened. I had to find another profession.

I liked to work with my hands on machinery.... There weren’t opportunities for athletic scholarships in trade schools, and there were no funds for college. My mom encouraged me to join the United States Air Force after seeing what the other services offered. She thought it would be a good way for me to get some direction in my life. So I joined in September 1970.

In December 1970, following basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, Campanale went to technical training as an aircraft maintenance specialist at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas. He was class leader, but he broke his collarbone playing football and ended up in a painful and confining figure-eight harness. After the injury, he could not take class notes, and he was not focused on studying, so he did poorly on the next test. His staff sergeant in-

structor belittled him before his classmates and replaced him as class leader. The humiliation was stinging, and he learned from that experience never to criticize people publicly.

As Christmas approached, Campanale was close to giving up, but hearing he could go home for the holidays lifted his spirits. He planned to surprise his mother and his girlfriend, so he told no one that he was coming home. As it turned out, all the surprises were on him: “My girlfriend had found romance with someone else, and my mom had gone to Chicago to visit friends.”

He followed his mother to Chicago and shared with her all the difficulties he was experiencing personally and in the Air Force. Tina Campanale’s instincts about her son’s needs were perfect. She told him that God would provide for him somehow and that she was going to help by introducing him to another young woman. She introduced him to Barbara, and a life-long match was made.

Airman Campanale’s next stop was Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, in February 1971. There he was assigned as a B-52 crew chief. Two excellent supervisors—Tony Saenz and Art Zelesnikar—taught him all about the technical aspects of aircraft maintenance. Saenz was an inner-city guy who became close friends with Campanale. Zelesnikar, who later would be known as Chief Z, taught Campanale how to be a more professional military person. “He would pull me aside and tell me we were doing all the technical things right, but there’s more to it than that,” Campanale remembered. “You’ve got to look the part, act the part, you’ve got to be a good citizen off duty, and you’ve got to learn more about the aircraft every day. You can’t just meet the minimum acceptable standard.”

Campanale did not accept those lessons at first. He struggled with his career development course, flunking the test twice. He got a break when Zelesnikar and others convinced the first sergeant to grant a waiver so he could get his five-level without taking the test.

“At that point, I started volunteering, helping people out, keeping my dorm room clean. I was getting better,” Campanale said. “And I started taking studying seriously.”

Barksdale was a tough assignment because of very frequent temporary duty trips. During Campanale’s assignment, the 2d Organizational Maintenance Squadron was involved in several tours to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, in support of B-52 Arc Light missions in Southeast Asia. Campanale later recalled that

We were in constant deployments to Guam. We were gone for six months and back home for thirty days. We’d get back and check in our toolboxes, then take a few weeks off. It didn’t count as leave time; you just had to let people know where you’d be. We’d come back and go again for another six months. It was tough. Families fell apart for several reasons. Dear John letters were common, family members would get sick, but no one was let go to come back. You couldn’t leave unless it was a life-or-death situation.

Campanale began to look for challenges. He raised his hand when the call went out for a volunteer to leave the crew chief business and go to aerial repair to work as a heavy maintenance, flight controls, and landing gear specialist. He worked hard and always tried to help out, all the while learning everything he could about his aircraft, B-52Gs and B-52Ds. He enjoyed the assignment, although he missed working as a crew chief.

When the Vietnam War ended, the B-52s returned, and Sergeant Campanale went back to Barksdale. He soon heard about an assignment at Grissom Air Force Base, Indiana, and the time had come to decide if he would make the Air Force his career. "I asked myself, 'What am I going to do if I get out?'" he said. "I can go back to my summer job in Massachusetts, but it wouldn't pay as much as what I make in the Air

Force. That's when I figured out my philosophy on whether to stay in or get out. That is, there are only two reasons to get out of the Air Force. One, you hate the whole Air Force. Two, you've got something better to do."

Neither reason fit them completely, so the Campanales, now with one child, decided to stay four more years. They wanted to be closer to Barbara's family in Chicago, so Campanale applied for a base-of-preference assignment to Grissom and got it.

He was assigned to the 305th Maintenance Squadron in April 1974. The squadron's technical administration section had failed a quality-assurance inspection because of a subpar tech order area. They wanted a crew chief to straighten out the problem. Because Campanale was the next one to show up, he got the job and kept it for four years. "I found a lot of things wrong in tech orders, and, as I fixed them, a lot of people who were higher ranking than me were upset," Campanale said. "I worked for a senior master sergeant who believed in me, and he would tell them, 'I believe David.' I never wanted to disappoint him. I got my seven-level by scoring 85 on my end-of-course test. I was very proud of that since I'd failed my five-level test." He left Grissom as a staff sergeant in August 1978.

Campanale then volunteered for an assignment at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, working on C-130s. The family found a friendly welcome there, and they enjoyed the stay. While in Hawaii, Campanale went to the Pacific Air Forces NCO Leadership School at Wheeler Air Force Base, an experience that prompted a profound change in him:



TSgt. David Campanale found that his career became more rewarding after he attended NCO Leadership School at Wheeler Air Force Base.

I went up there with no desire but to just pass, but something triggered off in my life. I came home on a break the night Sugar Ray Leonard lost to Roberto Duran in their first fight. Barb was there like she's always been. I said to myself, "You know, my wife really loves me and she'll always be here for me." It was then that I realized how lucky I was, and, within the course of that four-and-a-half weeks, I matured from a technician who was just living life into someone who became very, very serious about the Air Force and the professional aspects of it. I finished as the distinguished graduate, speech award winner, and won the athletic achievement award for the school. My confidence was pretty high.

At graduation from the leadership course, Campanale was cited as a technical sergeant selectee. "All at once, things started happening right for me," Campanale said. "As I'd transformed from high school into the military, the things I'd wanted to do never seemed to work out right, and I never found the motivation to get things charged up again. I'd struggled until then, but now things were going well."

The Campanales relished their tour in Hawaii. Their daughters, Jennifer and Jessica, were growing up, and Campanale, who was recovering from an Achilles tendon injury suffered playing varsity basketball, was coaching youth soccer. The family helped to transform a fledgling soccer league with fewer than ten teams into an eight-league organization. Dave and Barbara shared a part-time job stocking shelves at the base commissary, and he was promoted to master sergeant under the Stripes to Exceptional Performers (STEP) program.

Campanale's rise from staff sergeant, to technical sergeant, to the 6594th Test Group Noncommissioned Officer of the Year, to being a master sergeant was rewarding, he has explained, because just prior to that he had realized why he was not being promoted:

I had reached a point in my life when things would go wrong, and I blamed other people. Not in a bitter fashion. I was just content with the idea that I was doing the right things and everything was the fault of others or of "the system." Then I started looking around me and saw other people getting promoted and winning awards; doing well. What I started doing was taking account [of] myself, and...if something didn't happen right in my life, I blamed myself.

It had been easy before because I could just legitimize any situation and say, well, it was a little bit of Joe's fault, a little bit of Sue's fault, and a little bit of mine. Then I'd...move on. But then I started blaming myself 100 percent, knowing full well that I wasn't going to be totally wrong all of the time.

I just did it because it motivated me to be right, to try to do the right thing. It worked. I started getting better scores on WAPS [Weighted Airman Promotion System] tests and I was getting good grades in my college courses. It also helped that my mom

lived with us from 1979 to 1982 in Hawaii. Her guidance and loving hand always kind of helped out and made life easy for me to understand.

In August 1983, Master Sergeant Campanale went to Pease Air Force Base, New Hampshire, where he worked as a flight chief and line chief for the FB-111A and the KC-135. Pease was both a good and a bad experience. On the positive side, Campanale went to the Military Airlift Command NCO Academy at McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, shortly after arriving. He won the commandant's award, was distinguished graduate, and was a finalist in the speech competition. During that time, however, the family suffered losses. Barbara became seriously ill, and her father and grandmother died. Campanale's mother, Tina, also died.

After the cancellation of an assignment to RAF Alconbury, England, Senior Master Sergeant Campanale received a by-name request to go to Strategic Air Command headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, in August 1986. In his role as FB-111A and B-1B systems program manager, he advised others on some B-52 issues and did a number of briefings as a "fifteen-minute expert." The organization had a heavy temporary duty schedule, so people often had to brief someone else's issue to commanders. Campanale filled in for a variety of issues, including training, maintenance standardization, quality, and the B-1 Lead the Fleet program. When his Airman Performance Report was filed, Gen. Jack Chain, commander in chief of SAC, signed as the senior rater. Campanale made chief master sergeant the first time.

When Campanale became president of the Offutt Chiefs' Group, he set up informational briefings and morale-building events for military members and families. He helped to start a chiefs' induction ceremony. His hard work paid off when he was offered a senior enlisted adviser job at Castle Air Force Base, California. The offer, however, did not receive a strongly favorable response at home, so Campanale decided not to pursue it. He knew such offers were rare, but he did not feel he could devote his best efforts unless the situation was a happy one for his wife and daughters, too. No action was taken until Barbara, aware of how losing this opportunity would sadden her husband, visited the senior enlisted adviser at Strategic Air Command, CMSgt. Jan Boyd, and accepted the offer of an interview on Campanale's behalf. "We'll go wherever my husband wants," she said. "If he's happy, we're happy."

Col. Dick Martin hired Campanale as the 93d Bomb Wing senior enlisted adviser shortly after an interview in May 1989. The work was richly rewarding. As Campanale explained,

Now a lot of people tell me being chief master sergeant of the Air Force must be the pinnacle of my life. But I've got to tell you something. If I could go back and capture a moment in time that nobody could change, I would capture that moment at Castle as a wing adviser, and I would stay there the rest of my life.

It was during Desert Shield/Desert Storm and, God, our folks did just tremendous stuff. The community embraced us, and everybody worked long, hard hours together. Sometimes you thought it would never end, but everybody worked together, and we served a great purpose.

After Campanale had been at Castle for almost three years, the Military Airlift Command (MAC) at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, was looking for a senior enlisted adviser. Gen. H. T. Johnson was the commander, and he was interviewing potential candidates. He had called the senior enlisted adviser at Strategic Air Command, CMSgt. Dan Cook, and asked for recommendations outside the command because he wanted a fresh face and fresh experience. Cook recommended Campanale. Johnson and the vice commander, Lt. Gen. Robert Rutherford, interviewed him and three other senior enlisted advisers. Two days later, Campanale received a congratulatory call from Johnson, and, within the month, most of his family had moved to Illinois. His daughter Jessica stayed behind in California to finish high school.

Military Airlift Command became Air Mobility Command (AMC) in June 1992. Gen. Ronald Fogleman replaced General Johnson, and Campanale offered his position to whomever the new commander might prefer. He said to Fogleman, “Sir, I’m here to serve and I’ll do whatever [you require], but if you have somebody that you want to do this job and I’m not part of those plans, hey, that’s okay. I’ll do anything in AMC, and if I have to move my family again, I will.” He added, “I want to know that you share a positive relationship with your senior enlisted adviser because it’s important to the people of this command, especially due to the command reorganization.”

Fogleman had no plans to make a change. “[Campanale] was selected before I arrived at AMC and I didn’t know him, so we talked about whether he would stay on or whether I would bring in somebody of my own,” Fogleman said. “I explained to him that I had no predilection to bring in anybody else. I decided we would walk a mile together, and see how we worked.”

Fogleman and Campanale worked together for almost two years, and then a call went out for nominations to replace retiring CMSAF Gary Pfingston. Fogleman nominated Campanale. With two other finalists—CMSgt. Tommy Roberts and CMSgt. Rich Griffis—Campanale and his wife went to Washington, D.C., for face-to-face interviews with Air Force senior leaders. Fogleman was now one of those senior leaders, having been named the Air Force chief of staff, and he recalled the interviews:

I interviewed all three of the candidates and their wives because I had a vision about how I wanted to use the chief master sergeant of the Air Force; how I saw his role...[vis-à-vis] my role. I was very interested in making sure that the wives understood that this was



Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman (left) already had worked with David Campanale for two years before the day he swore Campanale in as the eleventh chief master sergeant of the Air Force.

going to be a high-energy job with a lot of time on the road. I wanted them to understand that the focus was not going to be in Washington; it was going to be on the troops in the field.

They were all excellent candidates with very supportive spouses. I also had an additional dimension to my selection process. I knew most of the former chief master sergeants of the Air Force, so I went out of my way to contact them. I wanted to talk to them about how they saw the job, and what kind of qualities and characteristics they would recommend... So I had lots of inputs to help make a rather deliberate decision.

...I ended up selecting Dave Campanale because, first of all, I knew him to be a self-starter. He had great energy and genuine care for our Air Force people. I knew that he had absolute integrity, that he understood and demonstrated excellence in all that he did. And I never saw him do anything for his benefit. He was what I think about when I think about a selfless individual who's there to serve the men and women of the United States Air Force. That's the way I saw him at AMC, and that's the way I've seen him [in Washington, D.C.].

As it's turned out, Chief Campanale is better than I even thought he was. He's outstanding. Here was somebody who could tell me the morale of the troops, and let me know what was on their mind and what we could fix. At the same time, I needed somebody who had the courage to stand up and tell people that you can't fix everything.

...He's not chief master sergeant of the enlisted force, he's chief master sergeant of the United States Air Force—the total force [active, Guard, Reserve, and civilians]. Dave Campanale has demonstrated that he understands that. I think the proof of the pudding is

that all those people find him approachable, and bring issues to him because they know that he'll work [on] their problem.

Campanale says it was a great honor to be chosen for the top position, but he had never aspired to it. He was proud to have achieved something because of what his mother had taught him: just be the best person you can be. He came to the job without specific goals, wanting instead to work on whatever issue was most critical at any moment.

Campanale believed that if you set goals, a specific course of action, it was easy to get too involved in those goals and to ignore other matters that arise collaterally. He intentionally set no conscious work agenda so that the people of the Air Force would feel confident that their individual problems, regardless of how small they really might be in the big picture, were just as important to him as were the larger issues. As he explained,

I was listening for big people issues: money, pay, compensation, housing, dormitory issues, uniform, evaluation systems, assignments, year of training. Those were all out there, based on the feedback I had as the AMC adviser, but I only knew about AMC. I was generally confident that most of those things were issues Air Force people wanted me to work [on], so I just tackled them one at time.

And, indeed, a number of people issues provided Campanale with challenges during his time as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force. First, the same year he began his tour at the Pentagon, the military officially launched a new managed health care program, the Tri-Service Medical Care Program, or TRICARE, which replaced the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services, or CHAMPUS, created by Congress in 1966. The adoption of TRICARE came in response to rapidly rising health care costs in the 1980s and 1990s. As with any major change in benefits, TRICARE came with a great deal of questions and anxiety. As the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, Campanale had to take the new TRICARE message to the troops.

Second, in late 1995, Congress threatened to change the retirement system. Congress had acted to change the military retirement system in 1980 and again in 1986. Both times, however, the changes applied only to people entering the service after the effective dates. In 1995, however, Congress considered a retroactive change. The proposed legislation would have based retired pay on the average of a person's final year of service rather than on his or her pay during the final month of active duty. This measure threatened a reduction in retirement pay of as much as 8.4 percent. Known as "High One," this program met strong resistance from the military leadership, including the chief master sergeant of the Air Force. Campanale predicted that it would hurt the morale not only of those directly affected but also of many others who would see this as Congress breaking faith with military members. As

Campanale put it, “people with four to eight years of service will look at this and say ‘Gee, do I stay twelve more years? What have I got to look forward to?’”³ In this case, the leadership successfully fought this proposed change.

Another victory of sorts came in the area of housing. For a number of years, the Air Force had been moving toward better housing for its young airmen. As many of the chief master sergeants of the Air Force would attest, housing for airmen had improved dramatically since the days of the open-bay barracks. The Air Force had already adopted a so-called two-plus-two dormitory standard, which meant that in each dorm unit, four airmen would share two rooms and one bath. In 1996, in response to the Quality of Life survey conducted in 1995, the service adopted the one-plus-one standard. Under one-plus-one, airmen would have rooms of their own but would still share a bath with one other. By the mid-1990s, the Air Force had moved about 80 percent of its dormitory residents to quarters that met the two-plus-two standard. It hoped to move 80 to 90 percent to the one-plus-one standard by 2010. Campanale viewed the one-plus-one standard as “very important” in terms of both recruiting and retention.^{iv}

When asked how he would like to be viewed by those in the Air Force, Campanale said, “I want to be seen as someone who is genuine and ready to go listen, to talk to the troops, and work any issue—regardless of what it may be, where it may be. Whether it’s day shift, swing shift, midshift, big issue, small issue, issue for one hundred, issue for just one.”

Campanale was not a proponent of long speeches. When he visited people at the bases, he encouraged their questions, because in those questions were the same areas of concern he would have covered in a speech. In the question-and-answer format, however, he and the others engaged in a dialogue. He found this to be a meaningful way to reveal his humanity and his sincere interest in his people.

Campanale is quick to point out that anyone can rise to be chief master sergeant of the Air Force. “I am the first chief master sergeant of the Air Force who was not on active duty when Paul Airey was named the first [chief],” Campanale said. “My math tells me that means there are ten future chief master sergeant[s] of the Air Force on active duty right now; some of them might be reading this. I’d also like to point out that they make the stripes in women’s sizes.”

In offering advice to those who would like to follow in his footsteps, Campanale returned to his core beliefs:

Be a good person; a person who understands discipline; a person who understands courage; a person who understands compassion for people; a person who has a balance in life and who doesn’t become one-dimensional. Do the job simply for the merits of trying to do the best you can do at the highest level possible. Have fun, be humble, and never, ever forget what it was like to be an airman, and how you felt about things. Then

you'll always remember what you felt in your heart and thought in your mind as a young airman, and you'll be better prepared to take care of our young people today, who will take care of our Air Force forever. Be honest and keep your promise.

All those things, the Air Force didn't teach me. My mom taught me [those]. The Air Force gave them different names and some situational approaches, but they're nothing more than the tools my mom gave me as she raised me.

Campanale retired on November 1, 1996, after twenty-six years on active duty. He currently resides in Tuscon, Arizona, where he works for an insurance company.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, the material in this biographical sketch was researched and compiled by CMSgt. Michael A. Brown, Sr.

2. Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics, 2000*, p. 65.

3. John T. Correll, editor-in-chief, "High One is a Low Blow," *Air Force Magazine* 78, no. 10 (October 1995): 2.

4. Suzann Chapman, "The Top Chief," *Air Force Magazine* 77, no. 4 (April 1995): 39; Suzann Chapman, "The Housing Problem," *Air Force Magazine* 79, no. 6 (June 1996): 41.