

Gary R. Pfingston

August 1, 1990–October 25, 1994



Gary R. Pfingston became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on August 1, 1990. George H. W. Bush was President of the United States, Donald B. Rice was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. Michael J. Dugan was the Air Force chief of staff.¹ As Pfingston described the time preceding his selection, “We woke up one morning to find the Soviet Union dissolved and the Cold War over. The Berlin Wall had crumbled. The changing international scene prompted us to do business differently. The armed forces got smaller and missions changed. During our downsizing, the United States Air Force experienced some dramatic changes.” In 1990, the number of USAF enlisted personnel stood at 430,818. By 1994, the number had dropped to 341,317, the lowest level since 1947, when the number of enlisted members stood at 263,082.²

Gary Pfingston was born in Evansville, Indiana, on January 2, 1940, and lived there until the mid-1950s, when his family moved to California in search of employment opportunities. He graduated from Torrance High School in 1958, where, as an avid athlete, he participated in football, baseball, and wrestling. After high school, Pfingston attended El Camino College. He enrolled at Long Beach State University but never attended because he was drafted. During that time, he met his future wife, Marsha A. Hunt, of Torrance. He worked for the Redondo Beach Recreation Department and delivered newspapers for the *Los Angeles Times*.

On Christmas Eve 1961, a month after his marriage, he received a notice to report for a draft physical. “My appointment to take the physical was January 2, 1962—my birthday,” he recalled. “So I got a Christmas present and a birthday present from the Selective Service Board.”

Visits to recruiters followed his physical. Draft-age men could not receive college deferments unless they were full-time students carrying twelve to fifteen credit hours. Because Pfingston was married and working, he could not carry such a heavy academic load. And the rules for marriage deferments had changed when John F. Kennedy succeeded Dwight D. Eisenhower as President in 1960: a married candidate for deferment now had to have a child depending on him. The Pfingstons had no children, so he enlisted in the Air Force. He was

inducted in Los Angeles on February 23, 1962, and went to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

Pfingston described basic training then as similar to basic training today, with one significant difference:

I guess the biggest thing is that there were two phases to basic. Everyone did the five weeks of phase one at Lackland. However, if you were selected to attend a tech [technical] school, you did phase two at the tech school. They had TIs [training instructors] at the tech school, just like they did at Lackland. But you'd go half a day to school and then [have] half a day of basic training—general military training is what they called it. Those who didn't attend a tech school completed phase two at Lackland and then went on to a permanent base as a direct duty assignment.

Recruiters did not guarantee jobs in those days. New enlistees took what was called the Airman Qualifying Examination (AQE), now the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). These tests were designed to measure administrative, electrical, general, and mechanical skills. Following those tests, inductees were matched with existing Air Force needs. Pfingston was chosen to attend the aircraft mechanics' technical school at Amarillo Air Force Base, Texas. "I went to B-47 school...[but] I never worked on one at any time during my career," he said.

In the middle of the summer of 1962, his wife, Marsha, moved from their home in Redondo Beach to Amarillo. She and the wife of one of Pfingston's airman buddies went together and found an apartment. "You've got to understand," Pfingston explained, "I only made \$79 a month as an E-1."

At Amarillo, Pfingston immediately engaged in baseball, one of his favorite pastimes. He was a skilled player, and he had played in some rookie leagues in Los Angeles before his enlistment. He played intramural softball at Amarillo, but he declined when he was asked to move up to the base fast-pitch team. He was entering the final few weeks of technical school, and he had orders to Schilling Air Force Base in Kansas. He and Marsha would at last be able to live as a family rather than make do with weekend visits.

"I got a message to report to the squadron commander," Pfingston said. "I was a dorm chief—a student leader—so I didn't know if I had screwed up or what...I marched into his office, saluted, reported, and he sat behind his desk with his big cigar, chomping on it. He said, 'Son, I understand you don't want to play for my softball team.'" Pfingston explained his situation—wife downtown, only three more weeks of school, orders to Kansas where they could live together, and so on. The commander asked Pfingston where he would like to be posted, and Pfingston told him California. "You play for my softball team," the commander promised, "and I'll guarantee you'll go to California." Pfingston's response: "Where do I sign up?"

When the softball season was over, the Pfingstons headed for Castle Air Force Base, California, where he served as a B-52 crew chief with the 93d Organizational Maintenance Squadron. While he was at Castle, the United States and the Soviet Union squared off in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. As Pfingston recalled,

I went to work one day with a pack of cigarettes and two dollars and didn't get to go home for thirty days. We were locked on base. We upgraded all the airplanes and put them on alert. We had to stay with our airplane. We lived there.

But, we were prepared for such occurrences. The training program in those days was much different than it is today. You had schools that you went to for every skill level, and they were mandatory. Another difference is the SKT [Specialty Knowledge Test] you take today as part of your WAPS [Weighted Airman Promotion System]. You had to take the SKT and pass it with a certain percentile score to get your three level, five level, and seven level. And you had to complete a formalized training program prior to testing. It was much more structured than what we have today, but a little bit of that structure returned with the Year of Training initiatives of 1993.

At that time, E-4s were required to attend the Noncommissioned Officer Preparatory School. Each base had its own preparatory school, and Pfingston attended it while at Castle. The course lasted four weeks and was much more regimented than Airman Leadership School is today. "It was like basic training," he said. "You had to fold your underwear and put them in a drawer a special way, and your dorm room...[was] inspected every day. This was a mandatory school, and we're back to that today, primarily due to the Year of Training initiatives taken under Gen. [Merrill] McPeak and...[me]. Obviously, the dumb stuff we did—folding the socks, daily dorm inspections—we don't do anymore."

During his tour at Castle, Pfingston continued to play fast-pitch softball, and his team won the Strategic Air Command championship one year. At the same time, the situation in Vietnam was heating up. The United States had advisers there, and rumors flew around the barracks about what was going on.

Pfingston noted that many people regarded those as the Air Force's "good old days." "Well," he said, "I lived through the 'good old days,' and they weren't worth a damn. There weren't very many people who stayed and made careers out of the Air Force because of pay and entitlements, or benefits. There weren't any." He said most first-termers in the early 1960s got out after four years with two stripes. That was high as they could be promoted—airman second class.

Back then, unless you were an E-4 with four years of service, your spouse received no benefits or entitlements—you couldn't ship household goods, spouses didn't get travel

pay. You couldn't even live in base housing—you had to be an E-4 [with] over four [years in] to...get on the list. Every airman in the Air Force lived off base....Most of the first-term airmen in the Air Force, that I was aware of, were there to [avoid being] drafted in[to] the Army.

In February 1966, about a month before Pfingston was due to reenlist or start the extension, the Air Force began the variable reenlistment bonus program.

The first four years of my career were tremendous. I loved every minute of it because I worked on B-52s for half a year and played softball for half a year. I thought, hey, this is a pretty damn good deal. Why get out? Because there was a limited amount of money in the bonus program, people had to reenlist quickly or the money might be gone. I think I got...\$1,800, and that was a lot of money at that time. After reenlisting, I stayed two more years at Castle. During this time, our first son, Mark, was born...at the Castle hospital.

In February 1968, then Staff Sergeant Pfingston was reassigned to Plattsburgh Air Force Base, New York. At Plattsburgh, he served as a B-52 and KC-135 crew chief and later became noncommissioned officer in charge of the aircraft records, documentation, and debriefing sections. During his stay at Plattsburgh, he was promoted to technical sergeant. "There was no WAPS system," he said. "It was still the promotion board system—behind-the-green-door, attaboy, good-old-boy, who-liked-you promotion system—where there was no visibility, no testing, or anything. They took all the staff sergeants' records into the deputy commander for maintenance [DCM] conference room and could promote whatever their authorization was." He sewed on his technical sergeant stripes in 1969. Two years later, the Pfingstons' second son, Brad, was born at the Plattsburgh Air Force Base hospital.

The next assignment took Technical Sergeant Pfingston to U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, for a year beginning in March 1972.

I started in aircraft maintenance again, B-52s and tankers, and then I moved into the DCM maintenance control area. We had a lot of planes on the base. There was a lot of reconfiguring of airplanes—what was called the "iron belly" modifications so B-52s could carry conventional bombs. Up until that time, B-52s were designed to exclusively carry nuclear weapons. That's when we first started using B-52s in a conventional war. We modified them to carry 500-pound bombs and put external bomb racks on them, also.

A big difference between a war deployment then and now is the communication process. The only ways we could communicate with our families...[were] by mail or the MARS [Military Affiliate Radio System]. MARS was run by volunteer radio operators.



CMSAF P. Fingston in 1973, while serving as a Military Training Instructor at Lackland AFB, Texas.

Once a month, I would sit in a MARS station for probably eight to ten hours waiting for my turn. The radio operators would relay conversations sentence-by-sentence. I know in Desert Storm we had AT&T commercial telephones, and I understand in Bosnia they communicated on the Internet, on computers.

He returned to the United States in March 1973 to begin serving as a military training instructor at Lackland. This duty was something P. Fingston had never done, and he feared it would not be his type of work. He got through the schooling and began working with the

3711th Basic Military Training Squadron, and he found that he “just absolutely loved it. Ultimately, I ended up spending eight-and-a-half years there and had just about every job there is for an enlisted person at Lackland.” In December 1975, he was selected as chief of the Military Training Division, Headquarters Basic Military Training. Training instructor duty was a three-year controlled tour. At the end of the second year, an instructor asked for a one-year extension. Pfingston received five extensions.

During his years at Lackland, the Air Force experienced a number of cultural changes, as Pfingston later recalled:

The biggest thing we went through, I guess, was the change from the draft to an all-volunteer force. Even today, I think it was a great thing to do. The quality of the airmen didn't change. As a matter of fact, it might have gotten better because we had more people [entering] the Air Force for the right reasons. They were volunteering to come in—not coming in to avoid the draft.

We started to do a lot of integration of males and females—male instructors with female flights and female instructors with male flights. We were bringing in more women, and more of them were attaining NCO status, and a lot of our young men were leaving basic training and going to work for female supervisors. Not long after that, we integrated squadrons to include male and female flights.

Overall, these years were not good years, as I recall, for the Air Force. Those were what were referred to as the hollow forces of the '70s. Being a young senior NCO at the time, I can say it was not very good. We went for a long time without a pay raise. Our reenlistment rates were low, and we were drawing down from the Vietnam years. We got so small, so fast. All of a sudden a base would become 50 to 60 percent manned, with no money, and you couldn't do your job. We were killing people, working them to death. We couldn't fix airplanes because we didn't have money to buy parts. We didn't have money to fly them if they were fixed. So flight crews were not getting proper training. We learned from that experience and did things differently when we had to do the draw-downs of the '90s.

Despite the challenges facing the military, Pfingston described the years at Lackland as professionally rewarding:

Personally, two things of great professional importance happened to me while at Lackland. First, I started getting involved in supervision of people and leadership roles. I truly believe that my experience as a TI is the reason I ultimately succeeded as a chief. Being a TI is probably the best training ground in the Air Force for people programs. Second, I met CMSgt. Bob Beilke. He became my role model. He saw that, as a techni-

cal sergeant, I wasn't doing everything I could do to improve myself or the Air Force. Don't get me wrong, I was good—I was selected instructor of the year. Chief Beilke sat me down and told me to either “Get all the way in or get out of my Air Force.” His guidance inspired me to attain the grade of senior master sergeant before leaving Lackland in 1981.

The Pfingstons moved to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, in August 1981. Pfingston served with the 605th Military Airlift Support Squadron as the en route maintenance branch superintendent and, later, as the organization's first sergeant.

Shortly after his arrival at Andersen, Pfingston broke his back working on a C-141 Starlifter. He was flown to Wilford Hall USAF Medical Center at Lackland for treatment of a fractured vertebrae, herniated disks, and sciatic nerve damage. After 147 days in the hospital, he returned to the 605th and became the first sergeant for the 600-member squadron. “I loved it. That's when I really first got involved with families and people programs.” Pfingston believed that his time as a first sergeant was also important preparation for his later service as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force. As a first sergeant, Pfingston “had his eyes opened” to the importance of families. He came to the conclusion that a supportive family, especially a supportive spouse, was crucial to career success.³ While serving as first sergeant, he was selected for promotion to chief master sergeant.

The next assignment took the Pfingstons to George Air Force Base, California, where he served as noncommissioned officer in charge of the 561st Aircraft Maintenance Unit. “We had the first evaluated ATSO [ability to survive and operate] exercise in a chemical environment,” Pfingston said. “So we had the first command inspector general evaluation...of working in chem [chemical] suits and gas masks in the desert, in 100-degree temperatures. It's ironic....Eight years later we would be in the desert in 100-degree temperatures, liberating Kuwait.” The inspector general with whom Pfingston worked with was the future Air Force chief of staff, Gen. Michael J. Dugan. This evaluation experience marked the beginning of Pfingston's long relationship with General Dugan.

Six months later, Pfingston was selected as the senior enlisted adviser for the 831st Air Division at George Air Force Base. He served in that role until July 1987, when he received a call from the Twelfth Air Force commander's secretary instructing him to come to Bergstrom and speak with the new commander, Lt. Gen. Merrill A. McPeak. He met with McPeak to interview for the Twelfth Air Force senior enlisted adviser position and was subsequently selected. Shortly after McPeak became commander in chief of the Pacific Air Forces, the PACAF senior enlisted adviser suffered a fatal heart attack, and McPeak tapped Pfingston to replace him. Pfingston has since described that adviser position as one of the best jobs in the Air Force, although the travel distances probably make it the most physically demanding role.



CMSAF Pfingston (left) and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Merrill A. McPeak worked closely together from 1987 until October 1994.

In the summer of 1990, Gen. Michael J. Dugan replaced Gen. Larry D. Welch as the Air Force chief of staff. One month later, nominations opened to replace CMSAF James Binnicker, and McPeak submitted Pfingston's name. The Pfingstons met with Dugan and, three days later, Pfingston received a call from Dugan, who said simply, "You're the guy." Pfingston described the challenges he would face as chief master sergeant of the Air Force:

When I came into the job, I honestly had no agenda. I was smart enough to realize that the next three or four years were not going to be very easy for the Air Force. We knew there was going to be a drawdown, [but] we didn't know how much. We knew there were going to be budget reductions, [but] we didn't know how much. So I knew there were going to be some tough things we were going to have to do.

Basically, my initial focus...was to...keep everything on track. To go on with what Jim [Binnicker] had done with the EPR [Enlisted Performance Report], and then tackle other stuff—the drawdown, the budget, and so forth.

In September 1990, Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney relieved General Dugan because of comments he made to reporters during a flight from Saudi Arabia about the Kuwait situation and the conduct of a possible air war. McPeak replaced Dugan. Throughout the remainder of 1990 and into 1991, the United States built up forces in the Persian Gulf region. As Pfingston recalled the efforts of the enlisted Air Force personnel in the conflict that ensued,

When the first bombs were dropped, I was on my way to Offutt Air Force Base. I listened to CNN report the first attacks on Baghdad. I think it was incredible how the enlisted corps performed throughout the war. The enlisted people in the Air Force—the airmen and the NCOs—demonstrated their ability to be the professionals that they are. They showed the world how good they were, how dedicated they were, how smart they were.

I think a lot of enlisted people grew up, matured during that war. The first time I deployed to the desert with General Dugan, there were basically two issues. Everybody was upset [about losing] their BAS [basic allowance for subsistence] because they were in field conditions, and they wanted to know when they were coming home. We worked the BAS issue. We increased the SGLI [Servicemen's Group Life Insurance policy benefit]. We got hazardous duty pay increased. And Secretary Cheney came out and said there is no rotation—the people in the desert are there for the duration.

When we went back in January with General McPeak, it was a completely different mindset. We had taken care of the problems, and they all knew they were there for the duration. Their focus then got in the right area. The enlisted people really demonstrated how good they were. They were highly dedicated, professional airmen.

Pfingston said that the toughest thing he and McPeak had to deal with during his tenure was the Air Force downsizing.

[McPeak] and I talked and decided that we were going to do everything voluntarily, as best we could. We were not going to do involuntary separations until it was absolutely the last resort. And that's why we worked so hard to get the VSI [voluntary separation incentive] and SSB [special separation bonus] programs. Probably well over half of my efforts during '91 and '92 and into '93 were spent working the drawdown. The personnel enlisted leaders played a major role in these programs. Chiefs like Dale Reed, Jimmy Tanner, and Josh Krebbs helped plan and organize our efforts, under the direction of General [Billy J.] Boles. We got out in front and took a big gamble in '92—we decided to do two years' worth of drawdowns in one year.

Pfingston said that McPeak, Secretary of the Air Force Sheila E. Widnall, and he were the only ones in the armed forces who backed the voluntary separation incentive and the special separation bonus.

I lobbied real hard for these programs because I thought it was better to pay somebody to separate than to RIF [reduction in force] or SERB [Selective Early Retirement Board] them. We worked the two years of downsizing—it was very, very tough. But, knock on wood and thanks to God, it worked. We never involuntarily separated anybody.

Quality of life issues—housing, pay, and medical benefits—took precedence throughout Pfingston’s tenure. He believed that the Air Force always took good care of enlisted personnel on the job, but he did not think that was true when they were not at work. And he knew that quality of life issues were pivotal in retaining members, because, as he learned as a first sergeant, “we retain families, [not just] people.” Housing emerged as a particularly important issue during his tenure. While attention focused on all areas, housing was of special concern for single airmen. As Pfingston explained,

Airmen ought to have their own dorm room. Jim [Binnicker] started that. He used to say his eight-year-old son is authorized his own room in base housing, but when he is eighteen and enlists in the Air Force and becomes a stealth fighter crew chief, he has to have a roommate. That’s dumb as hell. A result of that is Vision 2020, and it looks like each airman will have his or her own living area. [Vision 2020 would later be changed to the DoD one-plus-one dormitory standard.]

Regarding the Year of Training that he helped to inaugurate, Pfingston feared that the Air Force was taking for granted the knowledge base of its enlisted personnel, expecting them to know more than the service provided them. He saw no consistency in training and education programs beyond basic training. He believed the enlisted force needed some career paths, some milestones in line with the officer career model. They needed to know how to build a career—what they would have to do and when they would have to do it. Pfingston’s ideas resulted in Career Field Education and Training Plans. Other highlights of the Year of Training included three-level and seven-level technical schools for all career fields and mandatory in-residence professional military education schools for everyone.

A major program tackled during the Year of Training initiative was the Federal Aviation Administration certification program for Air Force aircraft maintenance specialties. Personnel received recognition for their training and certification that they could use if they pursued civilian careers in aviation. Pfingston supported expanding such programs to other career fields.

There seemed to be no shortage of issues during Pfingston's long tenure. In addition to Desert Shield/Desert Storm, the drawdown, quality of life and training issues, the early 1990s also saw such challenging issues as gays in the military and women in combat. Pfingston recalled that he and other Air Force leaders spent "an entire year" attempting to come to grips with gays in the military. On a more successful note, the service opened all but a handful of Air Force specialty codes to women, both officers and enlisted personnel.⁴

And one of the most visible issues involved changes to the Air Force uniform. The original blue suit had changed little since its adaptation from the Army uniform in the 1940s, and a redesign of the service dress uniform was intended to create a uniform that would reaffirm the Air Force heritage and give members a more modern, professional appearance.

The dress uniform, for example, now features a single-breasted jacket with a three-button front and a single breast pocket to help align the ribbons. For enlisted members, chevrons all now have stars; the shirt stripes are larger and bolder; and standard four-inch chevrons are worn on all outer garments, with three-and-one-half-inch chevrons on shirts. Changing the stripes for senior noncommissioned officers to distinguish their rank had been proposed several times before Pfingston and McPeak began the uniform redesign. The timing was right to do it all at once.

"Some people don't like [the senior NCO stripes]," Pfingston said. "I do...I liked the old ones, too. That's what I first put on. However, I still think the new ones visibly distinguish our top three senior NCOs, and I think that's a good thing." And, he pointed out, everything that was done to alter the uniform was done to save airmen money.

Reflecting on his long and eventful tenure, Pfingston considers being able to negotiate the means to reduce the force voluntarily his most significant accomplishment as chief master sergeant of the Air Force. But he also believes the training and quality of life improvements were quite important:

Training makes individual airmen better, which makes the Air Force better. It's very important that future administration[s] not allow training money cuts. The Air Force will suffer in the long run. The quality of life things also make it better for our airmen and their families.

In Pfingston's view, his primary responsibility was to do "everything possible to make it better for the troops." His philosophy was simple:

You must make decisions that are in the best interests of the Air Force, not individuals. I used this guideline whenever I was thrown into a major issue of concern to our people—homosexuals in the military, assignment policies (EQUAL and EQUAL Plus), CONUS

COLAs [continental United States, cost of living adjustments], VHAs [variable housing allowances], early retirements, the Year of Training.

Looking back on his tenure as CMSAF and his more than thirty years of service, Pfingston said that his most memorable experience was receiving, from President George H. W. Bush, the official battle streamers for the Air Force for the liberation of Kuwait and the defense of Saudi Arabia. Today, Pfingston lives in San Antonio, Texas, where he works as the director of golf services at the Dominion Country Club. While he may jokingly respond that his primary role as a former chief master sergeant of the Air Force is “giving golf lessons,” he takes seriously what he sees as his continuing responsibility to the Air Force. He views himself and the other former chiefs as part of a “communication chain.” They can talk to people, answer questions, explain issues, and relay what is going on. He concluded that “the USAF is probably in good shape because the former Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force have been active.”⁵

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographical interview is based on material researched and compiled by CMSgt. Ed A. Braese.
2. Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics, 2000*, pp. 64–66.
3. CMSAF Pfingston responded to his questionnaire (hereinafter Pfingston Questionnaire) in a telephone interview, notes from which are available in the files of the Office of Air Force History, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.
4. Pfingston Questionnaire.
5. *Ibid.*