

Sam E. Parish

August 1, 1983–June 30, 1986



Sam E. Parish became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on August 1, 1983. Ronald Reagan was President of the United States, Russell A. Rourke was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. Charles A. Gabriel was the Air Force chief of staff.¹ The growth in the number of USAF enlisted personnel that had begun in the early 1980s continued under Parish's watch. The number of enlisted stood at 483,022 in 1983 and increased to 494,666 by 1986.²

Born on October 2, 1937, in Marianna, Florida, Sam Parish grew up and went to school in the nearby towns of Malone and Bascom. When he was a teenager, he left the family farm and sought work in Fort Myers, Florida. At age seventeen, he joined the Air Force: "I just wanted a change," he said. "I worked as a florist and made good money—more in a week than an airman made in a month. But, I didn't see a future there."

The twelve-week basic training stint at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, was pretty simple for the young airman. He was inherently disciplined and, thanks to his southern upbringing, already said "yes, sir" and "no, sir" quite easily and often.

Following basic training, Parish opted to become a ground weather equipment operator, although he had no idea what that job entailed, and he spent twenty-six weeks in school at Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois. He was a bright student and was the class honor graduate in August 1955. At the time, follow-on assignment choices were based on a student's academic standing, and all of the assignments were overseas. They were written on a blackboard, and airmen chose their assignments in order of their class rank. Parish had "first dibs" so he picked France, as Paris intrigued him. The number-two student did the same. But, Parish recalled, the assignment took an unexpected turn:

There were only two France slots, so the next guy in line—a reenlistee—selected West Germany. Two days later, he took me over to the snack bar. I never drank in my entire life! He fed me three or four of those paper-cup beers from the exchange, and, the next thing I knew, he conned me into switching assignments with him!

The hoodwinked airman was headed for Wiesbaden Air Base, West Germany, whereas the reenlistee found his way to Chaumont Air Base, France. But things had a way of working

Parish distinguished himself as an honor graduate at the Air Force NCO Academy.



out for Parish, and his new duty location turned out to be a godsend in several ways. On the way to Germany, Parish reported to Manhattan Air Force Station, New York, as part of an experimental program to transport troops overseas by aircraft instead of ships. He boarded a C-54 bound for Europe, but the flight terminated in Paris. Day after day, Parish checked to see if follow-on travel was available, but it was not. He was “stranded” in Paris for weeks until he finally got a second flight to Frankfurt.

Parish finally reported to his first duty assignment, Headquarters 18th Weather Squadron. Initially, he was supposed to work at the upper air station, but again he took part in an experimental program. “Officials were combining Air Force specialty codes,” Parish said. “I was selected to...also train as a weather observer.” He spent the next four months reading manuals and taking specialty knowledge tests to upgrade his skills. “I was one of the first to receive the dual [specialty code], but, unfortunately, I did it through the books,” Parish said. “I never left the headquarters the whole time I was there.”

He spent three and one-half years in Germany, working for a supervisor who greatly impressed him and who significantly affected his career. “His name was Capt. Eugene T. Blanton, and he treated me as an adult,” Parish said. “He never oversupervised. He’d give me a job, then let me do it. The captain would let me sink or swim, but was always there if I got in too deep.”

Blanton, now a retired colonel living in California, was in charge of the unit’s plans and communications division at the time, and he recalled Parish’s hard-charging work habits:

“Sam was personable, aggressive, and incredibly smart. He was the only assistant I had, and I let him work to his fullest potential.”

The captain heaped great responsibility on Parish’s shoulders, and the young airman met the challenges time and again. Blanton’s trust unleashed Parish’s strong work ethic and desire to excel, and this first duty experience set the stage for a career marked by a constant resolve to reach for the top.

At Wiesbaden, Parish met another person who altered the course of his life. Ingeborg Eva-Marie Zimmerman was a young German woman who worked as a nanny and spoke little English. Fate smiled again on Parish, because he was already taking the mandatory German language classes two hours each evening. The language training paid off in romance, and the couple married in June 1957.

In 1959, Parish, a staff sergeant, was ready to rotate back to the United States. His career field was one of two Air Force fields with a mandatory seven-level requirement, a prerequisite for promotion to technical sergeant. The course was twenty-eight weeks long, entailing a permanent change of station. Parish scored only a B on the entrance examination and got temporary duty orders to Greenville Air Force Base, Mississippi, because the school was so backlogged that those with Bs would have to wait years for a slot.

Parish rolled up his sleeves and went to work in Mississippi, but he was more determined than ever to go to seven-level school. Several months after his arrival at Greenville, an inspector general team came to the base for a look at operations following an earlier unfavorable unit inspection report. To prepare for the visit, Parish’s unit worked hard and earned an excellent grade on the retest. With the inspector general on base, Parish spoke his mind: “When it was time for the conference period, I told my commander I wanted to see the IG. I thought the upgrade procedures were unfair, and I wanted to let him know how I felt.”

He met with the inspector general and explained how the vast majority of his training was accomplished through books and manuals with no hands-on experience. “I told him I wouldn’t sit around and wait for years and years to get my seven level so I could eventually make tech sergeant,” Parish recalled. “[I] [t]old him when my enlistment was up, I’d probably be forced to look for a new occupation.” The inspector general listened to the junior noncommissioned officer but offered no solutions. A few weeks later, however, a letter arrived to report that Sergeant Parish’s test scores were missing and to direct him to retake the seven-level entrance test.

“I took the exam and this time got an A,” Parish said, laughing. “Let me tell you, in no time at all I was heading to Chanute.” Again he graduated at the top of his class and became the youngest seven-level airman in his career field.

In August 1960, while in seven-level school, Parish was recruited by his former 18th Weather Squadron operations officer, Col. Donald F. Moore, to take a research and development job in Air Research and Development Command, which became Air Force Systems

Command the following year. Specifically, he became the noncommissioned officer in charge of the operational procedures branch of the 433L System Program Office at Laurence G. Hanscom Field,³ Massachusetts. The assignment lasted for nearly six years. Parish immersed himself in base activities, such as the NCO Academy Graduates Association and the softball team, which he coached. During his time at Hanscom, he and Inge and their sons, Sam and Steve, welcomed a third son, Scott. Parish also pinned on technical and master sergeant stripes during this tour.

In March 1966, he received orders to the position of chief observer for the 7th Weather Squadron in Heidelberg, West Germany. He was quickly promoted to senior master sergeant. At age thirty-one, after two and one-half years in Germany, Parish made chief and transferred to Headquarters Air Weather Service at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. Initially, he served as the command's chief observer and, later, as the division chief.

"About that time we heard the Air Force was establishing the Senior NCO Academy," Parish said. "I called a chief at Military Airlift Command to see about the possibility of me attending. I was one of the people who said we needed this academy, and I wanted to see what they were going to accomplish there."

When the Air Force opened the Senior NCO Academy, Parish sought and received a place in the first class at Gunter Annex, Alabama, in January 1973. Thomas Barnes and James McCoy, future chief master sergeants of the Air Force, were his classmates. After graduation, Parish became the weather service senior enlisted adviser. But he left after a couple of years because of a difference of opinion with the new commander and went across the street to "Mother MAC" to seek a new job. He found his niche in the personnel community and took over as the headquarters weather assignments adviser.

In August 1976, Parish and his family returned to Germany, where he served as sergeant major of the consolidated base personnel office at Bitburg Air Base. A year later, he was named senior enlisted adviser for the United States Air Forces in Europe at Ramstein Air Base, an assignment he found most enjoyable and productive. He established the initial First Sergeant of the Year program for USAFE. "USAFE was a great command—small enough [that] you could reach out and touch people and yet large enough to challenge any chief."

In the fall of 1980, Parish was tapped to become the 40th Air Division senior enlisted adviser at Wurtsmith Air Force Base, Michigan. He believed he was nearing retirement, and Michigan seemed an acceptable place to do that. He was in Washington, D.C., however, attending the retirement ceremony for CMSAF James McCoy, when he got a call to return directly to base. When he arrived at Wurtsmith, his boss, Maj. Gen. Robert E. Messerli, a tough taskmaster but a super commander, told Parish he was nominating him for the thirty-three-year program because it was the only way Parish could become the next Strategic Air Command senior enlisted adviser. Otherwise, Messerli could not sign the necessary paperwork.

"You're assuming I want this position," Parish said to the general.

“You want it,” the general replied.

Parish was selected as a thirty-three-year chief in early 1981. Later that year, Gen. Bennie L. Davis asked him to join the SAC team in Omaha, Nebraska. “He was a super boss,” Parish said. “When I first got there, I asked for three things: an airman recognition program with some teeth in it (including a SAC First Sergeant of the Year program), a new office location, and an [administrative] assistant.” He got what he wanted, and he forged a great working relationship with Davis.

“His goals and mine coincided,” General Davis said. “Sam liked to spend time talking to the troops, and he always brought their views back to us so we could work issues at our level.” Davis believed that Parish’s greatest strength was his way of drawing out the troops and learning what was on their minds. “He did this to perfection,” Davis said, adding, “I think this is the most important role a senior enlisted adviser has.”

Parish served for almost two years in Strategic Air Command. In 1983, when CMSAF Arthur Andrews approached retirement, the call went out for a new top chief. The selection process was similar to that for the Airman of the Quarter program. Applicants were nominated, and their names were sent to SAC. Then a board, chaired by officers, picked two or three finalists and forwarded their names to the SAC commander.

Parish did not volunteer, and his name was not on the list until Davis named him. The final slate of candidates was narrowed to three primary and two alternate finalists. Parish and Inge went to Washington, D.C., for another series of interviews, as did the other two primary finalists and their wives. Interviews were conducted by Lt. Gen. Kenneth L. Peek, Jr., the Air Force deputy chief of staff for manpower and personnel; Gen. Jerome F. O’Malley, the Air Force vice chief of staff; and Gen. Charles A. Gabriel, the Air Force chief of staff. Parish did



From 1960 to 1966, Parish served as the NCO in charge of the operational procedures branch of the 433L System Program Office at Hanscom Air Force Base, Massachusetts.

not believe the interview with O'Malley had gone well. As Parish recalled, "I never agreed with a thing he said." But that was not O'Malley's impression, and, several weeks later, Parish got the call inviting him and Inge to relocate to Washington, D.C.

Parish served as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force for three years and tackled a range of enlisted personnel issues. One such issue was the fixed-phase point for promotion to senior airman. "In 1985, the wait was forty-two months," Parish said. "It floated and depended on vacancies and the amount of money available for promotions." He convinced General Gabriel that the Air Force needed to promote qualified airmen to E-4 at a set point in their first enlistment, thereby allowing them a shot at the rank of staff sergeant before their first four years ended. In addition, Parish advocated and Gabriel approved an initiative allowing flightline personnel to wear a functional badge on their uniform. Eventually this initiative was expanded, and now all Air Force personnel in all specialties have functional badges identifying their career fields.

Parish also oversaw realignment of the system of enlisted professional military education. A strong advocate of enlisted PME, Parish said of his experience at the Air Force Systems Command Academy, where he was the honor graduate, "The experience lit a fire in my belly that has not been extinguished to this day—[it] probably will never go out."⁴ He has also said that the establishment of enlisted PME was "one of the greatest steps taken for enlisted people in the history of the Air Force."⁵ At the time he became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, however, he believed that the program needed realignment. By the mid-1980s, the Air Force had five levels or phases of enlisted PME: the NCO Orientation Course, the USAF Supervisor's Course, the command Noncommissioned Officer Leadership School (NCOALS), the command Noncommissioned Officer Academy (NCOA), and the USAF Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy (SNCOA).⁶ The first and third levels were conducted at base level. Parish noted that "much of the information taught in these levels were duplicated in technical schools or in other courses the airmen were expected to attend." The realignment in the mid-1980s eliminated the NCO Orientation Course and the USAF Supervisor's Course and created the NCO Preparatory Course (NCOPC). By moving from a five-level to a four-level system, Parish believed "[t]he goal was to teach individuals what we thought they needed to know before assuming the next grade/level of supervision."

In the early 1990s, the Air Force once again realigned enlisted professional military education, eliminating the NCO Preparatory Course and the command Noncommissioned Officer Leadership School and creating the Airman Leadership School (ALS). Although the realignments achieved their initial goals, Parish later wondered if perhaps there is now too great a time gap between attendance at the Airman Leadership School, the NCO Academy, and the Senior NCO Academy.⁷

Parish also worked to establish the John Levitow Award. Each level of professional military education included the designation of honor graduates. Parish believed that this award

ought to have a name beyond “honor graduate.” A1C John Levitow had earned the Medal of Honor in Vietnam. By naming the award after an enlisted Medal of Honor winner, Parish believed that “it would be a great way for the enlisted force to learn a little of our enlisted history—and to get his name known by *all* enlisted members.”

Additionally, a USAF-level First Sergeant of the Year program was developed during Parish’s tenure. In doing this, Parish continued a tradition he had established at United States Air Forces in Europe. There, while serving as the USAFE senior enlisted adviser, he had established a command-level First Sergeant of the Year program, despite a certain level of resistance. After moving to Strategic Air Command, again as the senior enlisted adviser, he established a similar program within that command. When he became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, he elevated the program to the USAF level. When asked of his goals in establishing these programs, Parish answered, “I was looking for ways to recognize this group of enlisted leaders who, in most cases, would refuse to allow themselves to be nominated for an award that other enlisted members in the unit were eligible for.”⁸

When Parish served as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, the service faced two major challenges. First, in the tight budget environment of the mid-1980s, Congress first began talking about making major revisions to the military retirement system. The system had seen some revision in the early 1980s, but the proposals of the mid-1980s would bring far greater changes to the system. Parish called it “the number-one area of concern” for enlisted people. Though Parish and other military leaders fought to preserve the existing retirement system, Congress enacted legislation in 1986 that created a new, reduced retirement benefit for those entering the service after August 1, 1986, a month after Parish retired. The Redux retirement program, which remained in place until 2000, became an issue for future chief master sergeants of the Air Force.⁹

The second challenge involved married military couples and joint spouse assignments. Parish noted that the number of married military couples in the Air Force had grown considerably. In 1975, married military couples made up only 3 percent of the force. By 1984, they accounted for 9 percent of the force, a three-fold increase. Also, over the years, these military couples advanced in rank. Finding joint assignments for younger airmen may have been relatively easy, but it became more difficult as these couple achieved more senior NCO ranks. The Air Force managed to station almost 90 percent of military couples at the same locations, but missions and requirements made this increasingly difficult. Parish foresaw that as the number of military couples increased, the ability of the Air Force to find joint assignments would decrease.¹⁰

Like his predecessors, Parish spent much of his time on the road, visiting bases, fielding questions, and staying in touch with the enlisted force. “If a chief is to take care of his troops, he’s got to know how to listen,” Parish said. “And, he’s got to listen from both sides. You have to hear the command or officers’ side, too.” Any time a change or proposal was considered, it

had to face this litmus test: is the change good for the Air Force, is it good for the individual, and does it hurt anyone? If it did not pass that test, he backed off.

Parish said that the chief master sergeant of the Air Force position is vital in today's military environment because the CMSAF provides the staff—the policymakers—with an enlisted viewpoint they have never had before. He believed it is the most important job in the Air Force, from an enlisted program perspective.

Parish planned to retire in 1985, but General Gabriel asked him to extend for another year, and so he remained stayed on until July 1986. He looked back on his career with a great deal of satisfaction and pride:

There have been very few times in my life when I haven't given my all, and I honestly and truly believe I've been successful. Success is achieving your best, regardless of what you're doing. I served one day at a time without thinking a lot about the future—how far I'd go with the system.

[The Air Force has] been my whole life—my family's life. I came in at seventeen—a green, uneducated airman, who was allowed to grow. I was allowed to do anything I was capable of, with few roadblocks in my path.

Parish often has been characterized as a “straight shooter” who does not waste time figuring out what people want to hear; rather, he tells them what they need to know. He has a reputation of getting things done and communicating easily with superiors and subordinates alike. Parish would agree that he is outspoken and not smooth and polished. “There aren't too many political bones in my entire body,” he said. It is his long-standing style. He always had the courage to go his own way.

Following his retirement from the Air Force, Parish served as vice president and director of military services for GEICO Auto Insurance Company and continues to work as a consultant. He remains very involved in the Air Force, attends myriad service functions, and visits NCO academies and airmen leadership schools. In his spare time, he has become a master gardener for the state of Maryland. A master gardener is a volunteer who, after receiving training from the state, helps to provide public educational programs dealing with environmental horticulture. He and Inge like to garden and spoil their grandchildren. “For an old farm boy...it's not a bad life!” Parish said, with a smile.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographic interview is based on material researched and compiled by MSgt. Mindy Poist and some editorial changes made by CMSAF Parish.
2. Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics, 2000*, p. 65.
3. Laurence G. Hanscom Field became Hanscom AFB in January 1977.
4. CMSAF Parish responded to his questionnaire (hereinafter Parish Questionnaire) by e-mail. A printed copy of the Parish Questionnaire is available in the files of the Office of Air Force History, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.
5. CMSAF Sam E. Parish, "Building Quality," *Air Force Magazine* 67, no. 5 (May 1984): 87.
6. Wayne A. Valey, *The Airman's Guide*, 1st ed. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1988), p.105.
7. Parish Questionnaire.
8. *Ibid.*
9. CMSAF Sam E. Parish, "Taking Care of the Troops," *Air Force Magazine* 68, no. 5 (May 1985): 74–75.
10. Parish, "Building Quality," p. 87; Parish, "Taking Care of the Troops," p. 75.