

James M. McCoy

August 1, 1979–July 31, 1981



James M. McCoy became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on August 1, 1979.¹ Jimmy Carter was President of the United States, Hans Mark was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. Lew Allen, Jr., was the Air Force chief of staff. In September 1979, CMSgt. Dorothy Holmes became the first enlisted woman to retire from the Air Force with thirty years' total active federal military service. The number of USAF enlisted personnel stood at 458,953 in 1979. That number dropped to 455,909 in 1980 before rising to 466,520 by 1981 as the country completed the drawdown following the Vietnam War and began a buildup of forces that would continue until 1987.²

James McCoy was born July 30, 1930, in Creston, Iowa. In 1948, he graduated from high school in Atchison, Kansas, and then attended St. Benedict's College in Atchison and St. Ambrose College in Davenport, Iowa. Shortly before enlisting, he decided against a vocation in the priesthood. A lengthy period of soul-searching and the guidance of a priest helped him to decide against the ministry. Instead, he joined the Air Force in January 1951, at the height of the Korean War.

In February, he entered the radar operator's course at Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi. His schooling was followed by an assignment to the 662d Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron at Apco, Ohio. In March 1952, McCoy moved to Detachment 6, 4071st Ground Observer Squadron, again as a radar operator—a “scope dope.” When the Air Force changed its ranks in April 1952, Corporal McCoy became Airman Second Class McCoy.

By 1956, McCoy was a technical sergeant. But the Korean War was over, and there were too many radar operators. The Air Force needed military training instructors, and McCoy retrained into that career field. It was not an assignment he wanted, but he and his family moved to Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

As a training instructor, McCoy considered himself firm but very fair. During his tour, which lasted from July 1956 to October 1957, the Air Force had a number of trainee abuse cases. “We were not exempt from them in our squadron,” McCoy recalled. He supervised fifteen to eighteen TIIs, and counseling them for wrongdoing was difficult for him. “I could have looked the other way—said no, it's not happening in my area,” he said. “But it did happen. I felt it was an integrity issue...a responsibility I had. I had to report it, so I did.” In ret-



In 1951, McCoy was assigned to the 662d Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron at Apco, Ohio.

respect, he found that assignment very rewarding because it was his first opportunity to supervise people.

As he recalled, his tour as a training instructor presented a number of challenges. He had been in the Air Force only six years and now was in charge of five groups of training instructors. Many of these were senior to him in years of service and had more time in as TIs. He knew that to earn their respect he would first have to prove himself. To do that, he learned all he could about the role of a training instructor. He went through the same training, he worked with basic recruits, and he pulled every kind of shift. In the end, he believed that his fellow TIs appreciated his efforts and understood that he was not there to just sit in an office and tell them how to do their jobs. Further, he believed that this tour had long-term benefits. Having a tour of duty outside one's career field, he asserted, helps to prepare

an individual for service as a senior noncommissioned officer.³

During his first six years in the Air Force, McCoy pursued a commission but did not succeed. "I decided then that if I couldn't be an officer,...I was going to be the best noncommissioned officer the Air Force has ever had," he said. That positive and committed attitude propelled him through a series of assignments that would take him to the top.

In October 1957, McCoy went to Clark Air Base in the Philippines as the base training noncommissioned officer for the 405th Fighter Wing. That duty was followed by assignment in August 1959 to the University of Notre Dame as assistant commandant of cadets for Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps Detachment 225. In July 1960, Technical Sergeant McCoy was chosen as the commandant of the Strategic Air Command NCO Preparatory School at Bunker Hill Air Force Base, Indiana. He was promoted to master sergeant on December 1, 1961. From July 1962 to April 1966, he was an instructor and sergeant major for the Second Air Force NCO Academy at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. In the middle of his tenure there, McCoy was promoted to senior master sergeant.

While on the faculty at the Second Air Force NCO Academy, McCoy realized that that professional military education was becoming a prerequisite for promotion to the highest enlisted ranks. Many of the students coming to the academy were master sergeants seeking or just selected for promotion to the new super grades. As McCoy viewed it, there was a sense that these master sergeants had to come to the academy because it was becoming important. "If you were going to be a senior noncommissioned officer, you had to be an NCO Academy graduate."⁴

While on the faculty, McCoy also had an opportunity to work on the curriculum for the NCO preparatory schools. He and his colleagues spent almost a year thinking and talking about what changes should be made. They were just about to put a new program into place when Vietnam wreaked havoc with enlisted professional military education.⁵

In April 1966, the Second Air Force NCO Academy and the NCO academies at Westover and March Air Force Bases in Strategic Air Command were closed due to the Vietnam conflict. Upon this closure, McCoy returned to the training career field and became the chief of the training branch for headquarters, Second Air Force. In July 1967, he went to Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, as noncommissioned officer in charge of professional military education for SAC. During this assignment, he was responsible for the reestablishment of the Strategic Air Command NCO Academy at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, and was promoted to chief master sergeant in August 1968.⁶

McCoy described the period between January 1968 and the middle of 1969 as "full of exciting adventures." He opened the new academy, he helped to establish new leadership schools at Plattsburgh and March Air Force Bases, and he had the opportunity to brief the top leadership. As he remembered, "it really gave me the experience that would propel me on to bigger and better things later in my career."⁷

However, McCoy almost left the Air Force in July 1970, when he was assigned as the noncommissioned officer in charge of opera-



Kathy and Jim McCoy were married in Davenport, Iowa, in April 1952.

tions training with the 41st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. “I had gone from a wing, to a numbered air force, to a major command. I was going back to a wing,” he said. He would be eligible for retirement within a year, and he thought about exercising his seven-day option. Instead, he made the major decision to stay in. “I’ve said this many, many times,” he recalled. “You look at every opportunity that comes along, and you don’t turn it down based just on what it looks like. I looked at it as another opportunity to further my professionalism.” While he was with the unit, he was given an additional duty as senior enlisted adviser—or senior airman adviser, as it was then known—in his unit’s parent command, Military Airlift Command.

McCoy returned to the personnel training field in April 1973, when he became chief of the military training branch for Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) headquarters at Hickam Air Force Base. In 1974, he was selected as one of the USAF’s twelve Outstanding Airmen of the Year.

He became SAC’s first senior enlisted adviser in March 1975, an assignment that prepared him for his eventual stint as the Air Force’s top enlisted member. It was a tough job during the Air Force’s “hollow force” days when retention plummeted and experienced personnel were hard to find. Strategic Air Command experienced its share of difficulties, specifically problems involving race relations. “It was a challenge,” he said, “making sure that our people were taken care of and that they were properly housed and properly fed. As I [made] my visits around the different bases, I could see that sometimes that wasn’t happening.” But he held to something he had learned years before: give back what you receive, treat people the way you want to be treated, and never forget where you came from. And with the help of SAC’s other senior enlisted advisers, he met the challenges.

While at Offutt, McCoy gained additional experience that helped to prepare him for the top job. CMSAF Robert Gaylor asked McCoy to chair two worldwide senior enlisted advisers’ conferences sponsored by the Air Force Association. Previously, in 1975, Chief of Staff Gen. David C. Jones established the Air Force Management Improvement Group (AFMIG). Jones was concerned with the quality of Air Force personnel management. He asked Lt. Gen. Kenneth L. Tallman, who would serve as the deputy chief of staff, personnel, HQ USAF, to gather a group of people from all ranks from all over the Air Force to discuss management issues and propose solutions. McCoy worked on enlisted professional military education issues. In 1975, Air Force enlisted professional military education had three phases: NCO preparatory schools, NCO academies, and the Senior NCO Academy. The problem was that most of the students at the NCO preparatory schools were already staff sergeants. McCoy and others believed that it was important that future noncommissioned officers begin their professional military education earlier in their careers. As a result, the Air Force reorganized enlisted PME to into five phases, including an NCO orientation course for senior airmen. Although the service once again reorganized enlisted PME in the 1990s, returning to a



CMSgt. James McCoy (left) and Gen. Russell P. Daugherty prepare to board a SAC aircraft in May 1975. McCoy had taken on the challenge of service as SAC's first senior enlisted adviser in March of that year.

three-phase structure, McCoy believes that the reorganization in the late 1970s represented an important change in Air Force thinking about enlisted PME. First, the current airmen leadership schools still offer instruction to young enlisted before they enter the NCO ranks. Second, he believed that the Air Force came to understand that enlisted education was just as important as that provided for officers.⁸

McCoy's interest in the Air Force's top enlisted job began to evolve as early as 1968 when he met and was favorably impressed by the first chief master sergeant of the Air Force, Paul Airey. Additionally, McCoy later recalled that

One of my mentors, the late CMSgt. John Bryant of Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, was vying to become the SAC nominee...for the second chief master sergeant of the Air Force position, which eventually went to...Don Harlow. As I escorted John and saw the things he was going through to become SAC's nominee for the position, I became more and more interested...

Two years later, in 1970, McCoy became eligible to compete for PACAF's nomination for the top spot. Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., wanted a nominee with more than twenty-two years of service and so did not select him. McCoy believed, however, that he had qualifications—especially his positive attitude and his practice of approaching mundane taskings, volunteering, and work requirements as challenges worthy of his best efforts—that eventually could be useful as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force.

When CMSAF Robert Gaylor announced his retirement, McCoy was nominated as his successor. But a call from a friend at the Pentagon squelched his hopes. He considered the friend a solid source, and the message was that someone else had been chosen. "I thought I was never going to get it," McCoy said.

Shortly after the first call, Gen. Richard Ellis, commander in chief of Strategic Air Command, called McCoy up to his office. "I knew the selection had already been made..., so I thought this was my consolation call," McCoy said. He walked up the stairs to the command section—a trip he described as the longest twenty-one steps of his life—and entered Ellis's office. When the usually taciturn general gave him a big grin, McCoy knew that the earlier message had been wrong. He obviously had been selected. McCoy soon had a call from Gaylor:

He told me, "I'm not sure why you want to come up here. The Air Force is probably in the worst shape that it has ever been in. We've had our worst recruiting year ever, retention is down, morale isn't great, we've got an administration that doesn't really care for the military, and they're now going to charge you \$10 per month to park in the Pentagon parking lot. Welcome to Washington, D.C."

In August 1979, when McCoy took office as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, retention rates for first-term airmen were down to nearly 25 percent, career reenlistments hovered at the 80 percent mark, and Air Force personnel were generally treated with disdain by a U.S. public still skeptical of and questioning the nation's involvement in the Vietnam War. Gen. Lew Allen, the Air Force chief of staff, met with McCoy and told him plainly that he did not know a lot about enlisted matters and was looking to McCoy for serious help.

The two men traveled to Air Force bases together, answering questions there in what McCoy has described as a "Chet Huntley–David Brinkley" manner: if General Allen got a question that he could not answer confidently, he would look at McCoy, and McCoy would pick it up immediately. Allen said he and McCoy made "an excellent team." McCoy recalled that he and General Allen "had an excellent relationship." Before he became chief master sergeant of the Air Force, McCoy did not know Allen, but he noted that they "were able to develop a close working environment that paid off, not for us but for the Air Force."⁹

In late 1979, McCoy set to work to improve the Air Force enlisted retention rate. His principal allies were General Allen and retired CMSAF Richard Kisling, who was then working as a civilian in the Pentagon. Armed with statistics from McCoy, Allen testified before a

congressional subcommittee that people were not staying in the Air Force because they could not make ends meet on enlisted military pay.

At the time, Kisling was working at the Pentagon in human development and personnel. McCoy explained how he and Kisling labored to plug the Air Force's experience drain:

Dick and I worked close[ly] together to increase the retention rate. That meant bringing more discipline back to our force. That meant working with recruiters to get the right people in the Air Force. That meant working with the folks in the basic military training program. That meant improving the NCO professional military education program. That meant getting a Stripes to Exceptional Performers Program started to give folks some incentive on the job and an alternate way of getting promoted instead of just through WAPS [Weighted Airman Promotion System].

I never knew Dick when he was chief master sergeant of the Air Force, but during my four years as SAC senior enlisted adviser, we became very close. He gave me a lot of insight into the position.

I've always said the military is nothing more than a mirror of American society. And American society in the late 1970s was sick of Vietnam, sick of the money that went into the defense establishment. We had come out of that war with a very bad taste in everybody's mouth. It would've been very easy for me to be negative, but General Allen would not hear of it.

The programs that the two men started helped to improve Air Force enlisted personnel retention. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 added to the positive military push already being made by McCoy and General Allen. Unlike his predecessor, President Reagan had a strong promilitary orientation.

Working with two administrations meant working with two different secretaries of the Air Force—Hans Mark during the Carter administration and Verne Orr under Reagan. McCoy said his relationship with each of them was always professional but different.

There were some things the Mark secretariat wanted to do that I simply didn't agree with. For example, they wanted to discontinue the initial shaved haircuts given trainees in basic training. I worked hard to save that...I thought it was key to bringing greater discipline back into our force and to ensur[ing] everyone in basic military training got started on the same foot.

I just don't think the people in the Carter administration, with all due respect, had a lot of feeling for the military.

McCoy recalled Orr as a likable man who loved to travel to Air Force bases. Because they did not travel together, Orr made it a point to get in touch frequently and tell McCoy of his experiences with the enlisted troops.

McCoy has noted how successive chief master sergeants of the Air Force work together to see projects through. When McCoy had the honor of laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns, he was the first enlisted USAF member to do so. He also presented to Arlington National Cemetery a plaque representing the Air Force's enlisted men and women, for placement in the cemetery's Hall of Plaques. That plaque had been Robert Gaylor's idea, but it took nearly eight months for its approval, so McCoy made the presentation.

When McCoy became chief master sergeant of the Air Force, he could draw on the experiences of his predecessors. He also believed that, over the years, Richard Kisling, Tom Barnes, and Robert Gaylor had helped to groom him for the position. Still, McCoy brought his own priorities and ideas on how to do the job. For example, while he saw that it was important for the chief master sergeant of the Air Force to travel, to get out into the field, he also wanted to get involved with staff work at the Pentagon. By the time he took office, and thanks to the efforts of his predecessors, the chief master sergeant of the Air Force automatically had permanent voting membership on eleven different boards, including the Air Force Welfare Board, the Air Force Commissary Board, the Air Force Uniform Board, and the Air Force Aid Society. McCoy also identified additional boards and conferences in which he believed he should have a role as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force. For example, he made sure he was involved with annual professional military education conferences, and he pushed for involvement with the Air Force Enlisted Widows' Foundation. Yet, while participating in all these boards and conferences, he also, again, recognized the need to travel and be visible.¹⁰

I could have spent the entire 2 years sitting in the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and worked the issues right out of my office, but I couldn't have worked them because they would have been Jim McCoy's opinion versus the opinion of the enlisted men and women of the United States Air Force. So I really had to set my priorities down and, like I said earlier, it really wasn't any more than what I was already doing [as a senior enlisted adviser] except on a much more expanded scale. It started fast and furious, and it ended fast and furious. It was the fastest 2 years of my life. I still sometimes think, especially since coming back here to the Omaha area, that it really didn't happen. But it did happen because of some of the things I recall; hopefully, I had an influence on the Air Force.¹¹

McCoy believed that serving as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force was definitely the highlight of his career; and the highlight of his tenure, he declared, came with his retirement ceremony:

I guess the high point of being the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force is 24 July 1981 when I became the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force to be officially retired with full honors at Bolling Air Force Base under the view of the Washington monuments and the Capitol Building and with the Air Force Honor Guard and the United States Air Force Band and with the Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force officially retiring me.¹²

In the years since his retirement in 1981, McCoy has remained at the forefront of Air Force issues, through his work as national president and then chairman of the board for the Air Force Association and later as the first retired enlisted member to chair the Air Force Retiree Council. He believes that the country's leaders do a better job now in communicating the issues to Air Force personnel and in making better choices of where to cut and where to draw the line.

Reflecting on his tenure as the Air Force's top enlisted blue suiter, McCoy said, "We all built on each other's accomplishments." And he offered two words of advice to people who ascend to the position he occupied for two years: stay humble. "It's important that you be yourself and that you don't become all wrapped up with the position," he said. "If you become impressed with yourself, then you're not doing what the position is designed to do."

Overall, McCoy said, his fondest memories of his time in Washington could also be used to describe the Air Force uniform—plain, yet distinctive. And in retirement, he said, he still bleeds Air Force blue, because he and his beloved Air Force have been inseparable. With Kathy, his wife of fifty years, and their eight children and twenty grandchildren, the Air Force remains McCoy's true love.

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographic interview is based on material researched and compiled by TSgt. Dave Malakoff and MSgt. Louis A. Arana-Baradas.
2. Department of Defense, *Manpower Statistics, 2000*, p. 65.
3. CMSAF McCoy chose to respond to his questionnaire (hereinafter McCoy Questionnaire) by e-mail. A printed copy of the e-mail response is available in the files of the Office of Air Force History, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.
4. Oral History Interview of CMSAF James M. McCoy by Capt. Mark C. Cleary, February 25–26, 1982, typed transcript, p. 53, K239.0512–1303, IRIS No. 1052938, in USAF Collection, AFHRA.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.
6. McCoy Questionnaire.
7. McCoy Oral History Interview, p. 67.
8. Bednarek, p. 118; McCoy Questionnaire.
9. McCoy Questionnaire.
10. McCoy Oral History Interview, pp. 126–28.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 208.