

**Robert D. Gaylor**

*August 1, 1977–July 31, 1979*



Robert D. Gaylor became the fifth chief master sergeant of the Air Force on August 1, 1977. Jimmy Carter was President of the United States, John C. Stetson was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. David C. Jones was the Air Force chief of staff. The Air Force was nearing the end of the post-Vietnam drawdown. The number of USAF enlisted personnel had dropped from a high in 1968 of more than 761,000 to a total slightly less than 470,000.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Gaylor was born in 1930 in Mulberry, Indiana. His teen years were strongly influenced by the events of World War II and by people returning to Mulberry from military service. The second of eight children, he wanted to get out on his own, travel, and learn a skill following graduation from high school. In September 1948, he enlisted in the Air Force.

About the same time Gaylor arrived at basic training, President Harry S Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which called for equality of opportunity in the U.S. military. Change did not come overnight, however, and Gaylor arrived at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, at a basic training facility that was still very much segregated. For Gaylor, who had grown up in Indiana and had never met an African American, the situation was quite shocking. Although he had no experience with integration, he also had no experience with segregation. He thought that African Americans had clearly demonstrated their ability to serve in the military during World War II. He did not understand the continued segregation that resulted in them being billeted separately, eating separately, and even being punished separately, as the military prisoners on the base were also segregated by race. He also came to realize that African Americans were allowed to enter only certain career fields and that they were barred entirely from entering technical fields. He saw the African American recruits only when they were out marching. He never had an opportunity to talk with any of them. He found that quite disappointing and the whole situation a terrible social injustice.<sup>2</sup>

In December 1948, as a veteran of fourteen weeks of military experience, Gaylor was handed three career choices upon arrival at Waco Air Base, Texas—cook, fireman, or military policeman (MP). Options offered at that time were based on local needs, rather than on personal aptitude.

“I was initially disappointed,” Gaylor recalled. “I expected a career field requiring technical expertise and with a bright future. But I learned a most valuable lesson that day that I never forgot in my thirty-one-year career: the needs of the Air Force always come first, and the sooner an Air Force member accepts that, the easier [his or her] career will be. The Air Force is now doing a much better job of blending Air Force needs with the individual’s aptitude and personal desires in arriving at career selections.” But that day, given his options, Gaylor became a military policeman.

The years 1948 and 1949 were transition years for the U.S. Air Force, which had just been designated an independent service. Gaylor has vivid memories of the ongoing adjustments being made. It took two to three years for the blue uniform to replace the olive drab; for the one-piece fatigues to be phased out; for black shoes to replace brown; for the new chevrons to replace the Army stripes; and for the new airman ranks to supplant private first class, corporal, and so forth. “It was in the early part of 1950 when we discarded the MP armband and proudly wore the blue and orange air police brassard,” Gaylor said. “I attended the military police school at Camp Gordon, Georgia, in 1949 because there was no air police [AP] school as yet. It was late 1949 that my 677 MOS [military occupational specialty] was replaced by my 96130 AFSC [Air Force specialty code], the air police designation.”

Gaylor had witnessed some of the last of the segregated military during his basic training. In 1949, he also witnessed the beginning of the integrated military, in which he would serve the majority of his career. During that summer, word came to his base that the Air Force would soon integrate. Gaylor recalled receiving the news with some measure of confusion. He did not understand why it had not happened earlier. He recalled that a rumor began to spread. It suggested that if you could not accept integration, all you had to do was let your commander know, and you would be discharged. Gaylor and his fellow airmen soon heard the truth. The commander addressed them, essentially telling them that they would accept integration or suffer the consequences of undue interference.

Soon, as Gaylor recalled, trucks began to back up to the barracks door. He and his barracks mates had to rearrange the facility to make room for the African American airmen. He remembered that about eight to ten African American military policemen moved into his barracks. He did not remember the change causing much trouble. There were arguments, he noted, but they were no different than the kind of barracks disagreements that existed before integration. Integration did bring change, though, especially in music, as Gaylor recalled. They went from listening to Glenn Miller to listening to Duke Ellington, for example. And Gaylor developed a number of friendships.

The fact of integration, however, did not end the injustices. Gaylor noted that achieving full equal opportunity for all airmen regardless of race took a long time, nearly a generation. He believed that one of the keys was education, and in that, he holds, the Air Force has come



AP Gaylor (far left) spent four years at Laredo Air Force Base, Texas, in the early 1950s.

a long way. And, he noted, the experiences and lessons learned from integration helped the service during the 1970s when it had to begin to accept and utilize far more women.<sup>3</sup>

When his three-year enlistment ended in September 1951, Gaylor again had only two choices. The Korean conflict had begun in June 1950 and leaving the service was curtailed. He could reenlist or accept a “Truman Year,” an automatic one-year extension. He had been promoted to staff sergeant and was earning a decent wage, so he reenlisted for another three years. “I used my \$150 bonus to buy my first car, a 1939 Chevrolet. I was happy,” he remembered.

Gaylor’s promotions always came as soon as he was eligible. He made corporal with eight months of service and buck sergeant (E-4) three months later. “I [knew] the secret of getting promoted,” he said. “Keep a positive attitude, stay out of trouble, do your job to the best of your ability, learn all you can, help others, and have fun!”

Gaylor recounted the advantages and difficulties of his early years in the service:

We had our share of problems and irritations, as we do now. There were few technical schools, no off-duty education, or PME programs. We lived in open-bay barracks, ate in mess halls, reported for pay, received our uniforms from squadron supply, shined our collar

brass, and had GI parties. Some airmen received an Article 104, the forerunner to today's Article 15. But my Air Force was growing, and with the autonomy came pride.

In many ways, the good old days *were* the good old days. Parking spaces were always available—only a few airmen had cars. The base movie cost a quarter. Payday was the big day of the month. There was no complaint on separate rations as no single airman was [permitted] to draw that allowance. For married airmen, the spouse received part of his pay plus the quarters allowance in a monthly allotment check, which only she could cash. We ate on six-compartment metal trays in the mess hall and then got to wash them on KP [kitchen patrol]. Gosh, I'd do it all over again!

And always the changes, mostly for the better. Dormitories replaced barracks, rooms replaced open bays. Dining halls and plates bumped mess halls and trays. Paychecks direct to the bank put pay lines in history. Pay increases enabled airmen to buy cars, stereos, homes, fine clothes. One could almost...afford to get married. And certain enlisted grades had to have the squadron commander's permission to do that.

We had some great leaders, back then, who practiced integrity and conviction. Some of today's leaders could use the stiff spine displayed by effective leaders I've worked for.

As the Korean War continued into 1952, the Air Force opened or reopened additional bases, primarily for flight training. Gaylor and six other air policemen from his unit were transferred to Laredo Air Force Base, Texas. He stayed at Laredo four and one-half years and matured as a professional policeman. He was promoted to technical sergeant in 1953 and to master sergeant in 1956, earning that grade with only seven years, seven months of service.

In April 1952, he met Selma, and they married in 1953. "She added class to my life, a sophistication of sorts," he said. And they welcomed children to the family in 1954, 1955, 1956, and 1959. "I think Selma was relieved when I got orders for Korea in September 1956," Gaylor added.

Gaylor wanted an assignment at Lackland Air Force Base when he left Korea, and the personnel clerk he spoke with told him he could guarantee that by putting a "T" on Gaylor's forecast sheet. But the clerk did not tell him what the T meant. Without knowing it, Gaylor had volunteered to be a basic training instructor (TI). He decided to make the best of it and found it to be extremely worthwhile. "My entire future was enhanced by that experience," he said. "If it was up to me, every NCO would have a tour as a TI."

In Gaylor's view, a number of assignments—including training instructor, recruiter, NCO Academy or Leadership School faculty member or first sergeant—will prepare non-commissioned officers for higher levels of leadership. All of these assignments allow non-commissioned officers to experience the Air Force outside of their primary career field and broaden their background. Serving as a training instructor gave Gaylor a new perspective on



In 1951, Gaylor was outfitted in full working equipment as a member of the air police.

the young airmen and a greater appreciation of what is done to turn young men and women into airmen at Lackland Air Force Base.<sup>4</sup>

After two years as a training instructor in a male basic training squadron, Gaylor became the senior training NCO in the Women in the Air Force basic training squadron. “How many male airmen worked for a woman in 1960?” Gaylor asked. “What a special experience.” His two-year assignment convinced him that women could perform in any job, and he remains convinced that, where the talent exists, opportunities should be afforded.

In 1962, Gaylor returned to an air police assignment at Tachikawa Air Base, Japan. He was promoted to senior master sergeant in 1963 and served as the provost sergeant. In 1964, Gaylor and his family moved to Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi for his tour with Strategic Air Command. While with SAC, he attended the NCO Academy at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana,

where he was selected as the honor graduate and was offered a faculty position. Impressed with the caliber of the faculty, Gaylor readily accepted the offer. Though he ended up not staying as long as he had hoped, he believes that his time at the NCO Academy in the mid-1960s relaunched his career. To some extent, he believed that he had peaked. The experience, first as a student and then as a faculty member, was like a “rocket lit under me.” He wanted to do more, learn more, and grow in his career. He believes that all noncommissioned officers should have the opportunity to attend an NCO Academy, and he does not understand those who do not want to go.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict in Vietnam, however, shortened his teaching career, and he received orders to return to the police field at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. Air police were becoming security police. While at Korat in 1967, Gaylor was promoted to chief master sergeant. “April first is my lucky date,” he recalled. “I made technical sergeant, master sergeant, senior master sergeant, and chief master sergeant all [on] April first. There were no line numbers in those days; we all sewed it on the same day.” The chief left Thailand with orders for Grand Forks Air Force Base, North Dakota, but those orders were quickly changed. He, Selma, and their four children would remain at Barksdale Air Force Base, and he would help to reopen the Strategic Air Command NCO Academy. “My timing was perfect,” Gaylor said. “It was January 1968, and we started our first class in July 1968. We had six months to

When CMSAF Robert Gaylor retired, he and his wife, Selma, greeted well-wishers at the retirement ceremony. Air Force Chief of Staff Lew Allen, Jr., presented the Legion of Merit to Gaylor.



hire a faculty, prepare the building and dormitory, and develop lesson plans. It was exciting to be on the leading edge. Teaching PME [professional military education] has got to be the most rewarding, challenging task any NCO can have. I loved it!”

Gaylor developed a servicewide reputation as a teacher and advocate of NCO leadership. In February 1970, Second Air Force commander Lt. Gen. David C. Jones chose Gaylor as his first sergeant major. “He challenged me to spread leadership throughout the command,” Gaylor said. “It was slow at first, getting a foot in the door, but within months I was getting [invitations] to visit our command bases. There was a dire need for leadership training.”

Gaylor reflected on the turbulence of the early 1970s:

Hair was a major factor, drugs were prominent, the racial scene was stirring, the “dap” [a handshake greeting practiced primarily by black airmen] was gaining popularity, airmen were speaking out—at times demanding. The crisis in Southeast Asia was becoming increasingly unpopular, and a segment of our military society was restless. I [had] no problem with that, but I still believe we must work our problems through existing channels or build new channels.

And that’s where General Jones excelled. By 1971, he had received his fourth star and moved to USAFE, and I was fortunate to go with him. We didn’t just talk about the

problems; we acted on them. The general led the way, and many of us contributed. Leadership training, race relations training, drug and alcohol abuse clinics, improved facilities and recreation outlets were new command ventures. I remember a visiting congressman who said to us, . . . “I’m going back to Washington and spread the word that if you want to see things done right, visit USAFE!” That’s a great feeling—to be on a winning team. And all you need are realistic standards, avenues of communication, effective training, and concern. What an exciting three years!

When Jones was selected as the Air Force chief of staff in 1974, he moved Gaylor to the Air Force Manpower and Personnel Center, with a charter to travel throughout the Air Force and spread the word about effective leadership. With CMSAF Thomas Barnes working on many issues at the Pentagon, good things were beginning to happen for that branch of the service. “It was a slow process,” Gaylor said, “but there were lights at the end of the tunnel. The unpopularity of the Vietnam war had resulted in an image reduction in the military, and we all needed to work together to restore the hard-earned positive respect. For three years, I stayed on the road. I [gave] 275 leadership talks in 1976, as an example. I had blanket orders that authorized travel to any Air Force location. Can you imagine a more exciting opportunity?”

By Gaylor’s assessment, the years from 1970 to 1977 were times of innovation in leadership. He cited the following examples:

In 1969, General Jones, then commanding Second Air Force, became aware of an ex-convict, ex-drug addict named Cal Espinosa, who was gaining local fame at Castle Air Force Base, California, by talking to and counseling . . . the base airmen on the evils and hazards of drug use. [Jones] flew to Castle, met Cal, and was so impressed with his style and message that he hired him to spread the word on drug/alcohol abuse throughout his command. That is a courageous leader[ship] decision, [and] it worked. Cal also accompanied Jones to USAFE and later teamed with me at the military personnel center for three years of travel. We were the dynamic duo—Cal’s forceful message on the drug scene and my sessions on leadership.

The second example is my prime purpose for transferring to USAFE in the summer of 1971. The command did not have any formal PME for enlisted members at the time, and General Jones recognized the immediate need for that type of training, especially NCO leadership. Of course, I would have preferred to activate a full-scale NCO academy in USAFE, but we had neither the funds nor [the] facility. As an interim [measure], we established the Command Management Center at Lindsey Air Force Station [Germany]. We renovated an old building to house students and presented a sixty-hour course

of instruction on leadership/management skills, communicative skills, and contemporary issues to hundreds of USAFE NCOs from throughout the command.

There were four of us on the faculty and one support sergeant, and we smothered the command with training. At times, we became mobile by presenting our course at our bases in Spain, England, Greece, Turkey, [and] Italy. Our adrenaline was on constant flow because our reputation was so high that NCOs were begging for a slot. Our center was the forerunner to the eventual opening of the USAFE NCO academy in 1975.

The highlight of Gaylor's came on August 1, 1977, when he was selected as the fifth chief master sergeant of the Air Force.

Those two years as chief master sergeant of the Air Force flew by. So much to do, so little time. Every time I wore the uniform with the unique chief master sergeant of the Air Force chevron, I knew how Clark Kent must have felt...[when] he ducked into a phone booth and emerged as Superman. My immediate staff and the entire Air Force staff helped me do my job. I always felt we were a team. When General Jones became chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Lew Allen became my new boss, and he was a superb leader, with the concerns of the enlisted men and women foremost on his agenda. I traveled, I spoke, I visited, I sat on boards, I toured work centers. I tried to feel the pulse of our great force and serve as a conduit of information.

Gaylor identified four major issues as the greatest challenges he faced as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force. First, the image of the Air Force was quite poor. The Vietnam War had sullied the image of the military in general. He saw a need to help restore pride and confidence within the Air Force. He traveled extensively, talking to airmen about standing tall and taking pride in their military careers. Second, the racial turbulence that had rocked the Air Force in the late 1960s and early 1970s had not fully abated. Racial tension was still quite evident. Gaylor believed that much of it was due to the fact that the service had talked about equal opportunity but had not yet really delivered on it—it was not practicing what it was preaching. In the late 1970s, the Air Force received another “wake-up call.” Gaylor then worked to address issues, including even such mundane things as having African American cosmetics and music sold in base exchanges. A third major challenge involved the role of women. Gaylor recalled a great resistance to allowing women to enter certain career fields. Once again, he worked to try to educate the force in order to eliminate the stereotypes and prejudices that were working against equal opportunities for enlisted women. Fourth, drugs and alcohol remained problematic. As he had done earlier in his career, Gaylor addressed this issue head-on. He believed that much of the problem was due to the low morale of the late 1970s. He worked to talk to airmen and educate them to the hazards of drug and alcohol use.<sup>6</sup>

When asked about his major accomplishments, Gaylor was quick to point out that nothing is accomplished without help. The Air Force leadership and Gaylor's staff all contributed greatly to any victories during his time in office. When asked directly, though, Gaylor noted that the Air Force introduced a uniform change during his tenure that signaled an important shift in attitude. Until the late 1970s, when enlisted women reached a certain point in their pregnancy, they had to wear civilian clothes. Gaylor worked to introduce and get approved a new maternity uniform. He also helped push through a policy change that allowed E-4s undergoing a permanent change of station to transport their families at government expense. This change recognized that many more enlisted force members were married and had children and that they were marrying at a much earlier stage in their careers. He also considered it something of an achievement that he was permitted to have his wife, Selma, accompany him on much of his official business. She was very supportive of him, and she was also very active in measuring the pulse of the Air Force. She worked on these trips, meeting with enlisted wives and discovering what some of the family issues were. Finally, Gaylor believed that he left a legacy of promoting leadership.<sup>7</sup>

When his two years in office ended on July 31, 1979, Gaylor said, "I leave with my head held high because I can honestly say to you that the Air Force received the best effort I could give." And to his friend and successor, James McCoy, he said, "You had better continue to improve and try new things and make the Air Force better. My buddies and I made the Air Force what it is today. We made it a better place to live, work, play, and to do your thing. And I warn you...you had better not mess up my Air Force!"

Immediately after retirement, the Gaylors relocated to San Antonio, Texas, where Gaylor was hired as a management development specialist at a large insurance company—in many ways, continuing his efforts from the Air Force: teaching, counseling, motivating, and listening.

Robert Gaylor, a master of common sense with a positive attitude and a strong concern for others, continues to meet with Air Force members in more than forty USAF base visits each year. He believes that one of the most important roles that a former chief master sergeant of the Air Force can play is that of providing a link between the Air Force of the past and the one of today. He sees himself as having an important institutional memory. A gifted storyteller and a walking encyclopedia of USAF enlisted history, he loves talking to young airmen today, telling them of what life was like in the Air Force during its formative years.<sup>8</sup>

The chief does not force advice on airmen today, but he is glad to tell them about taking advantage of opportunities and about how he made it to the enlisted pinnacle:

Opportunity doesn't always come with flashing neon lights. Frequently, there is risk or sacrifice involved in grabbing what might appear to be your opportunity, but you've got to do it. And it rarely pays off immediately, but someday you'll look back and realize you

made the right move at the right time. Too many airmen want success without risk; success without investment of effort. It rarely happens that way.

I was never a complainer; I took whatever happened and made a plus out of it. I was never bored. I learned the enemy of boredom is activity, mental or physical. I never felt I was better than anyone else, but just as good. And most of all, I never took myself too seriously. Those habits worked for me.

[Finally,] when the personnel colonel at Waco Air Base tells you you're going to be an MP, you thank him and then go be the best MP you can possibly be. To make a plus out of a potential minus—the choice is yours.

## NOTES

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1. Department of Defense, *Manpower Statistics, 2000*, p. 65. Unless otherwise noted, this biographical interview is based on materials researched and compiled by the Office of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.

2. CMSAF Gaylor chose to respond to his questionnaire (hereinafter Gaylor Questionnaire) by producing a tape. A copy of the tape is available in the files of the Office of Air Force History at Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.

3. Gaylor Questionnaire.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*