

Thomas N. Barnes

October 1, 1973–July 31, 1977



Thomas N. Barnes became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on October 1, 1973. At that time, Richard Nixon had begun his second term as President of the United States, John L. McLucas was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. George S. Brown was the Air Force chief of staff.¹ During Barnes's four years as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, U.S. involvement in Vietnam ended. On May 15, 1975, TSgt. Wayne Fisk became the last U.S. combatant to engage hostile forces in Southeast Asia. The drawdown that had begun in the late 1960s continued and accelerated. In 1973, the number of Air Force enlisted personnel stood at 571,790. By 1977, the number had fallen to 469,878.²

Thomas Barnes was born in 1930 and was raised in Chester, Pennsylvania, where his father served as the pastor of that small city's largest black Baptist church. Chester claims that it served as an important link in the Underground Railroad, helping slaves to escape from the South before and during the Civil War. In the 1930s and 1940s, when Tom Barnes grew up there, it was a city with integrated neighborhoods and schools. Chester also hosted a number of war-related industries during World War II. Barnes, whose father died when he was fourteen, worked part-time for a shipbuilding company to support the war effort and to help support his family.³

In 1949, Air Force recruit Tom Barnes boarded a train headed to San Antonio, Texas. During the long ride, he made friends with the other recruits. The young men, a few black, the majority white, were together until they reached Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, where Barnes got what he called "the shock of my life." The previous year, President Harry S Truman had issued Executive Order 9981, which called for equality of opportunity in the nation's military. However, this action did not bring about an immediate transformation of the services. The newly created U.S. Air Force and its sister services took several years to complete the integration process. The Air Force was still segregated when Barnes arrived for basic training—his first real experience with racial segregation after growing up in an integrated community. While his new white friends began training immediately, he was held in casual status until enough other black recruits arrived to form a flight.⁴

After basic training, Barnes began his career in aircraft maintenance with a stay at Chanute Air Force Base, Illinois. At aircraft and engine school, Barnes chose to specialize in



Following basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, eighteen-year-old Tom Barnes studied aircraft maintenance, with a specialization in hydraulics.

hydraulics because of an inspirational vision presented by one of his instructors, who told the young trainee that a hydraulic system could lift the world, if you could find a place for it to stand. The study of hydraulics proved fascinating to Barnes, and he soon developed a passion for the system.

After technical school, Barnes headed to his first assignment. In those days, travel between assignments was a far more complicated and time-consuming process than it is today. Instead of heading directly to his new unit, Barnes headed to Camp Stoneman, California, a replacement depot. Also known as a “repo depot,” this was a facility where enlisted personnel had to report to await the processing of their orders. While waiting at Camp Stoneman, Barnes worked in supply, helping to issue clothing and other

items to personnel headed overseas.

By late 1949, the Air Force had desegregated most but not all of its units. After finally leaving Camp Stoneman, Private First Class Barnes went to his first duty assignment with the 4th Troop Carrier Squadron at McChord Air Force Base, Washington. There, unlike in basic training, he found himself at the leading edge of Air Force integration efforts. This was a squadron that had not been integrated, and Barnes was one of the first blacks to join it. As he later noted, “It was an experience for them, and an experience for me, needless to say.”⁵

Being one of the first blacks in a newly integrated unit certainly presented challenges. However, the unit also offered Barnes an opportunity for more specialization in C-54 maintenance as he continued his studies in hydraulics at Great Falls, Montana. He returned to McChord, and, shortly thereafter, his unit shipped out to Ashiya, Japan, to fly missions supporting the war in Korea. The troops worked twelve-hour shifts on a thirty-day temporary duty assignment that lasted a year.

While working on the C-54 transports, Barnes developed an interest in flying and a desire to become a flight engineer. Because he could not return to the United States for flight engineer training, a crew chief pal taught him the art of flight engineering and let him fly resupply and medical evacuation missions in his free time. Barnes worked hard and mastered

the duties of each crew member. But training was not his only hurdle. He had to pass a check flight with an officer grading his performance. There were no black flight engineers in the unit, and the officers in charge were in no hurry to make Barnes the first. Repeatedly, he was denied certification.

That finally changed on a day when crew rest and mission taskings kept the other flight engineers busy. On a C-54 maintenance test flight, the test pilot had no choice but to take Barnes with him. That day, the unwilling pilot and the man who would become the Air Force's top enlisted member reached an understanding in the air. Somewhere between engine featherings, free falls, and stalls, there grew an interdependence that made the flight a success. As Barnes recalled, "We got on the ground. He looked me straight in the eye, and said, 'I had no intention of certifying you, but, after today's workout up there, I see no way to deny that.'"

By the time Barnes finished his tour in Japan, he had been promoted to sergeant. He had accumulated 750 flight hours over enemy territory and had earned the Air Medal. Barnes then went to Westover Air Force Base, Massachusetts, to join the 1253d Air Transport Squadron, where he worked as a flight engineer on the C-54. The unit soon gained a new designation, the 30th Air Transport Squadron, and Barnes gained the opportunity to work on the new C-118. He then volunteered for duty with the 1308th Ferry Group at Kelly Air Force Base, Texas, delivering airplanes to overhaul depots and returning them to their home units. The tour at Kelly gave Barnes a chance to use his fluency in Spanish and to witness the new and improved basic training at nearby Lackland Air Force Base. He viewed the training as new because it seemed less "Army." The basic training he went through focused greatly on physical conditioning. The basic training he witnessed while at Kelly still had its share of exercise drills, but it also had a greater focus on academics. It was also improved because integration had reached Lackland.⁶

In 1952, Barnes moved to Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, where he continued to work as a flight engineer and crew chief on a number of aircraft, including the B-25, T-11, C-45, and C-47. Shortly after arriving at Andrews, Sergeant Barnes became Staff Sergeant Barnes. Though he had been a noncommissioned officer since promotion to corporal, Barnes achieved staff sergeant rank the same year the Air Force revised its rank structure. Among other changes was the limitation of NCO status to staff sergeant and above, at that time technical sergeant and master sergeant. The change came with some controversy, but Barnes believed it helped to define clearly the special position of the noncommissioned officer.⁷ By the time he left Andrews six years later, he had been promoted to technical sergeant.

Barnes's next stop was Loring Air Force Base, Maine, where he earned promotion to master sergeant and entered the senior NCO ranks and the world of Strategic Air Command. Barnes now experienced a different type of flying mission. Following the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, SAC went on a twenty-four-hour airborne alert. The bombers flew armed with

nuclear weapons. The alert missions had code names like “Hard Head” and “Chrome Dome.” These became a permanent part of Barnes’s lexicon. As he recalled, flights “were twenty hours and thirty minutes in length on the one hand, and twenty-four hours on the other,” Barnes said. “The airplanes took off, went to an orbit point, orbited, and then were re-fueled while orbiting. They used extra crew members to accomplish these missions. The expansiveness of our air capability was really developed during that period.”

Barnes later spent a year at Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, where he served as a senior controller for all assigned aircraft, and then followed that assignment with a tour in Southeast Asia. He was the first of those who served as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force to have firsthand experience with the Vietnam War. At Ubon Air Base, Thailand, he worked on F-4 fighters. As a member of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing “Wolfpack,” he worked with Col. Robin Olds and Col. Daniel “Chappie” James, Jr. Barnes recalled a tremendous sense of purpose and esprit de corps alive in all members of that unit.

After duty in Thailand, Senior Master Sergeant Barnes and his family relocated to Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas. He worked there first as a T-38 line chief and later became the noncommissioned officer in charge of maintenance control. When the wing sergeant major retired, Barnes, who had been promoted to chief master sergeant in December 1969, got a significant career break. Without even applying for the job, he was selected as the wing commander’s new senior enlisted adviser in 1970, the year that the Air Force first officially authorized SEAs. His first challenge in that new role was to help to settle a growing dispute between the San Felipe school district and the air force base. The district was losing federal impact funds because base personnel sent their children to the schools in the Del Rio district. Barnes had a personal stake in the situation because he had six children in different grades. The solution he helped to reach was to merge the two districts into one. At Laughlin, he also worked to foster better relations between the base community and Mexican authorities, and he negotiated to get airmen released from jail in Mexico.

In 1971, Barnes caught the attention of the commander of Air Training Command, Lt. Gen. George Simler. Taking a close look at the undergraduate pilot training bases in the command, Simler liked what he saw at Laughlin. He sent word to Laughlin’s wing commander that he wanted his senior enlisted adviser to move to headquarters to do for the command what he was doing for Laughlin. Simler wanted Barnes to report immediately to Randolph Air Force Base. Then he wasted no time introducing Barnes to all of the ATC wing commanders in a clear show of support for his new adviser.

This assignment proved to be a pivotal point in Barnes’s career. Simler and Barnes traveled together frequently. For Barnes, the most exciting part was the method of travel. Simler traveled in the airplanes his pilots used for training. He and his aide, an instructor pilot, would fly in one airplane; the chief and an executive officer flew in another. “It was a real



As the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, Barnes traveled a quarter-million miles annually, visiting enlisted airmen around the world. He is shown above (left) being welcomed at Yokusuka Air Base, Japan.

thrill to fly across the country in a formation with your boss, in the back seat of a high-performance airplane,” Barnes recalled.

Barnes credited Simler with giving him opportunities to move his career toward greater heights: “He extended me great responsibility. He propelled me into some things I never dreamed I would be involved in.” The men were a great team, and Simler’s sudden death was a terrible blow to Barnes. The general was killed on September 9, 1972, when his T-38 crashed on takeoff from Randolph Air Force Base. Earlier that day, Simler had been notified of his promotion to four-star rank and told that he would be moving to the Military Airlift Command (MAC). He spoke with Barnes about his promotion and his plan for Barnes to join him at MAC headquarters at Scott Air Force Base. “He was supposed to fly in a T-39,” Barnes remembered. “He then decided he was going to go in a T-38....I witnessed his death in that airplane—one of the most tragic days of my life. I saw the whole thing.”

The chief experienced many highs and lows in his days as Air Training Command senior enlisted adviser. He also saw, firsthand, both good and bad examples of how the Air Force could deal with the growing racial strife on its bases and within its ranks. The 1960s and early 1970s were times of great change and challenge in terms of race relations in the United States. In many ways, the military reflected the turmoil in the larger society. At Laughlin Air

Force Base, the leadership went to the young black airmen and asked them what could be done to improve their situations. Also, the surrounding community proved more open to the airmen than were many other communities.⁸

At Laredo Air Force Base, in contrast, Barnes observed that the leadership failed to try to deal with issues and the community proved quite hostile to the black airmen. Late in 1971, racial unrest escalated into a potentially dangerous incident at Laredo. Several angry black airmen locked themselves in the base dining hall. “They’d been in there most of the night,” Barnes recalled, “almost to the early morning hours; hadn’t torn up a thing; had eaten only what was out and hadn’t broken into anything to get food out. In general, they stayed within the confines of the mess hall...[security police] surrounded the place; had a D-8 Caterpillar bulldozer ready to smash the door. There were armed police in flak jackets all around it, waiting for an order. Nobody was going to come out in that environment.” The only answer was to get inside the hall, get some answers from the airmen, and get the word back to the commander. The only man for that job was Tom Barnes.

Barnes flew in from San Antonio to see if he could help to end the standoff. “It’s not the easiest thing in the world,” Barnes said later, “to face a group of angry young men who have run out of hope; who feel they must use desperate means to express their frustrations, disappointments, and dissatisfactions.” But he succeeded and was praised for defusing the situation.

Two years after the Laredo incident, Barnes, already well known and well respected, received the highest recognition. During a basic training inspection, he got a phone call from his boss, Gen. William McBride, telling him he had been chosen as the chief master sergeant of the Air Force. Following a hurried trip to Washington, D.C., Barnes was sworn in to his new position, with Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. George Brown on one side and his wife, Marie, on the other.

Thomas Barnes was the first black to serve in the highest enlisted post in any of the services. The Army did not have a black sergeant major of the Army until 1996. The Marine Corps selected its first black sergeant major of the Marine Corps in 2001. Neither the Navy nor the Coast Guard had, as of March 2003, selected a black for their top enlisted job. When asked if he saw himself as a trailblazer, Barnes answered yes and no. Being the first of his race to hold such a position was important. However, Barnes believed that he had been selected primarily for his overall abilities, not his race. Certainly, as the Air Force faced a future of growing diversity within the ranks as a result of the move to the all-volunteer force, his race was not inconsequential. It did help to send some kind of message. Yet, he knew—and his accomplishments in the job substantiate this—that his record, not his race, proved the deciding factor in his selection.⁹

Barnes held the office for four years, including two one-year extensions of his initial two-year commitment. During his four-year tenure, Barnes regularly received applause for

his ability to communicate with anyone. In his view, listening is the best thing a chief can do for the troops. "Listen. Discern levels of a problem, and go to the appropriate authority," he said. Barnes did not just hear about a problem and then run to the chief of staff. He would visit other bases in the same command and see if they all had the same problems. "If I could isolate a problem at one base, I didn't bring it back to the Pentagon. I'd take it to the base or wing commander," he said. "You can't ever afford to overlook the four-star-level management of a command.... They are the major supporters to the chief of staff. The chief of staff and the four-stars run the Air Force. If you cross one of these guys, you're a dead duck." As a result of his leadership style, the word spread throughout the Air Force about how proactive the chief was and how he let the bases and commands solve their own problems with whatever assistance was needed.

As the highest ranking enlisted member of the Air Force, Barnes was the spokesman for all enlisted airmen, and he often testified on Capitol Hill about quality of life issues. His greatest contribution came in the area that inspired his greatest passion and ranked among his largest challenges and most significant accomplishments: working to ensure equality among ranks and races. Barnes tackled many difficult issues during his tenure as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, but none was as personally frustrating as the issue of racial inequality. Society's problems had permeated the Air Force. The black power movement was in full swing in the United States by the time Barnes took office, and black airmen faced harsh scrutiny for everything from hairstyles to slang terms.

"Groups of blacks would get together off duty," Barnes said, "and they wouldn't go to the club, the bowling alley, or the pizza parlor. They'd get on the corner right under a street light, just like [back on] the block. The security police had the bad habit, every time they saw a bunch of blacks, of thinking something bad was happening, and they had to go break it up."

Most of those police actions led to violence, and Barnes spent a lot of time breaking up disturbances before they became fights. As chief master sergeant of the Air Force, Barnes was there to advise commanders, and, as a black man, he had insight into the frustrations of black airmen. He urged commanders to get racial sensitivity training, and he was able to help black airmen. Barnes was also active in promoting racial equality. He took great pride, for example, in his role in coordinating some of the events that brought about the Air Force Social Actions program in 1969 and in improving the program after he became chief master sergeant of the Air Force. He stated that

There was a need to address those societal problems that had entered the Air Force and, during my tenure, the Social Actions program became a means of addressing the inequities in the system. It was a look at what was beginning to happen. I played a part in getting all that together, and that carries... forward today.

Barnes continued to work to eliminate the systemwide denial of opportunity that placed minorities primarily in nontechnical jobs, such as cook and clerk. He assisted in organizing a team of people from different areas of the Air Force who traveled throughout the service to assess barriers to communication and to recognizing the value of every person as revealed in practice. His accomplishments in these areas are still felt today.

Barnes did not limit his efforts at promoting equality to the area of race. He also ranked among his challenges and achievements his efforts to convince the Air Force to use women in nontraditional roles. He saw no reason to bar women from jobs that through training and testing they had proven capable of handling. This was a significant problem not only in the Air Force but in the other services as well. According to Barnes, the Marine Corps seemed the most opposed to the idea and even worked hard to prove that allowing women in nontraditional roles would not work. Barnes labored to break down barriers for women in the military.¹⁰

Finally, Barnes ranked his efforts to promote enlisted professional military education as among his most important contributions. Barnes had witnessed the lack of deep commitment to enlisted professional military education: the Air Force all but halted it in a cost cutting exercise during the Vietnam War. As a result, Barnes charged, the Air Force had non-commissioned officers who were good technicians but who did not know how to lead and how to manage people. In the early 1970s, he believed, the Air Force was still “playing catch-up.” He did not believe that anyone should advance in rank without professional military education. Barnes worked to establish more firmly the service’s commitment to enlisted PME and labored on this issue in cooperation with his counterparts in the other services who were also concerned with strengthening enlisted PME.¹¹

During his tenure, Barnes traveled an average of 264,000 miles annually, visiting bases and interceding for airmen worldwide. After his military retirement, Barnes kept his hand in Air Force business with speaking engagements at military functions. The Fort Worth, Texas, community took advantage of his experience by making him a member of the Carswell Air Force Base Reuse Committee. He helped to conduct a study of the environmental impact of the base on the Fort Worth community and aided the committee with other issues until the base closed. He became a news databank of current Air Force issues and kept up with everything from personnel concerns to the newest weapon systems.

Barnes retired after twelve years as vice president and director of employee relations for the Associates Corporation of North America and lived in Bonham, Texas, on a sprawling ranch that he shared with his grandchildren, forty cows, a donkey, and three horses. And he continued to seek new levels of achievement. Until slowed by an injury, Barnes competed in the rodeo sport of team penning. In this event, a team of riders works to cull a designated animal out of a small herd and drive it to an enclosure. The best teams can complete this task in

seconds. Barnes's home is full of the trophies won by his team at several levels of competition.¹² Barnes died on March 17, 2003.

At the beginning of his tenure, the question most frequently asked of Barnes was, "What programs will you implement for blacks?" "The answer was none," Barnes recalls. "I told them I work for all blue suiters."

Barnes pointed to his managerial skills, developed through professional military education; his communication skills; and his ability to do many tasks at once as the qualities that helped him to forge a successful career. He will also be remembered for paving the way for anyone who thinks he or she cannot make it to the top. Recalling his life's work, he said the following:

I'd like to be remembered as a role model for people who believe they can't get there. I don't mean to brag, but I hope it inspires somebody....I was qualified and just happened to be black. I was not naive. I knew there were people who felt my selection was tokenism or [was intended] to lend visibility to the Air Force Equal Opportunity Program....It was an honor to have been chosen on the basis of my qualifications, as opposed to my race or my gender.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographical interview is based on material researched and compiled by TSgt. Trish Freeland.

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

3. Enlisted Council, Air Force Association, *The Chiefs*, p. 19; Bednarek, *The Enlisted Experience*, p. 28.

4. Enlisted Council, Air Force Association, *The Chiefs*, p. 19.

5. Bednarek, *The Enlisted Experience*, p. 64.

6. CMSAF Barnes chose to respond to his questionnaire (hereinafter Barnes Questionnaire) by means of a telephone interview, notes from which are available in the files of the Office of Air Force History at Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.

7. Barnes Questionnaire.

8. Bednarek, *The Enlisted Experience*, pp. 104–105.

9. Barnes Questionnaire.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*