

Richard D. Kisling

October 1, 1971–September 30, 1973



Richard D. Kisling became the chief master sergeant of the Air Force on October 1, 1971.¹ Richard M. Nixon was President of the United States, Robert Seamans, Jr., was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. John D. Ryan was the Air Force chief of staff. During Kisling's two years as the Air Force's top enlisted person, the Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy opened at what was then Gunter Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. Before his retirement, three future chief master sergeants of the Air Force—Thomas Barnes, James McCoy, and Sam Parish—would graduate as part of the academy's first class. In 1971, the Air Force had 624,980 enlisted personnel. By 1973, it had 571,790.²

Richard Kisling was born in 1923 and was raised on the Iowa farm his grandfather had homesteaded. One of ten children, he and his family struggled through the Great Depression and dust bowl years. His parents were respected members of the local community. His mother worked as a schoolteacher, and his father served as the township assessor for over twenty-five years. Though his parents sometimes strained to feed their large family, Kisling remembers his childhood as happy and secure. His parents taught him many lessons including the importance of having integrity and following the Golden Rule—doing unto others what you would have them do unto you.³

His childhood environment also set the stage for his service in the military. “When I was growing up, there was a great feeling of patriotism and a desire to do something for the country,” Kisling recalled. He received an initial deferment from military duty because he worked as an inspector at the grain exchange in Sioux City, Iowa. The job was considered “war essential,” and men working there were exempt from service. But a few months before his twenty-first birthday, in July 1944, Kisling's draft status was changed to 1-A. The Allies had landed in Europe on June 6, 1944, and, as they drove across France, casualties were mounting. Because replacements were needed, the Army started drafting men who had previously been deferred.

Kisling went to Fort Crook, Nebraska—now Offutt Air Force Base—for his preinduction physical. In less than a month, he was ordered to report for duty. “At that time, I had hopes of getting into the Navy or the Army Air Forces. It just happened to be my lucky day, and I got picked for the infantry,” Kisling recalled, with a laugh. He went to Little Rock, Arkansas, for

seventeen weeks of combat infantry training. Most of the instructors were combat veterans, many of whom had earned Purple Hearts, and the training was rigorous and realistic.

He volunteered for paratrooper duty, for an extra fifty dollars a month, but an attack of appendicitis cut short his airborne trooper career. That illness was a lucky break, because many of the men in paratrooper training with him perished in the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne, Belgium, in December 1944.

Private Kisling's military travels took him to Camp Gordon, Georgia; Fort Meade, Maryland; and Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts. In the spring of 1945, he finally boarded the SS *Mariposa*, an old luxury liner that had been converted to a troop ship. "The ship was very crowded, and we changed course every three minutes to avoid German submarines. It took us about twelve days to get to Europe. We landed in Marseilles, France, where we piled [into] trains and headed up to Germany," he said.

The war in Europe ended within a month of Kisling's arrival in France. He was assigned to the intelligence section at 3d Infantry Division headquarters in Salzburg, Austria. When the division moved to Germany, the intelligence section negotiated the repatriation of displaced persons with the Soviets and monitored the repatriation process.

"This was a very complex and sensitive mission," Kisling noted, "and we soon learned that we could not trust the Russians." The Soviets consistently falsified the number of people being repatriated through their checkpoint to the Western Zone. When their numbers were challenged, they vehemently denied any responsibility. Seeing these political machinations almost immediately after V-E Day was a lesson for the young soldier. The gunfire had ceased, and the Cold War had begun—and he had witnessed it at close range.

Kisling did not intend to stay in the service. "I thought I would go back to Iowa, get my old job in the grain exchange, and then decide if I was going to be a farmer or go back to school," he said. He was anxious to get home, but the experience was disappointing. Civilian life seemed boring. He missed the GI camaraderie, and he wanted to travel. After only ninety-three days as a civilian, Kisling reenlisted and volunteered for an overseas assignment. He went to northern Italy, where he was assigned to the 80th Infantry Division. After a few months, he was offered an early release from active duty.

"When I got back to the states, I found I could take terminal leave, get paid for all the leave I hadn't taken while on active duty, and reenlist in another branch of service," Kisling said. He recalled that in Europe during the war, as he and his fellow infantrymen slogged along muddy roads, they frequently were passed by Army Air Forces men riding in dry, comfortable trucks. That memory was not lost on him, and, when he reenlisted in 1947, he joined the Army Air Forces, soon to become the United States Air Force. By April 1947, he was headed to his first duty station in his new branch, at Chanute Field, Illinois—a place where he found that the Army's air arm had developed very different military culture:

When I moved into the open-bay barracks at Chanute, I couldn't believe it. Here were master sergeants, tech sergeants, staffs, and one- and two-strippers talking about their work and socializing—all on a first-name basis. In the Army, you didn't call anyone of senior rank by his first name. You could ask a question in the line of duty, but otherwise only if they spoke to you first. I couldn't believe this and thought, my gosh, what a change!

Kisling worked as a clerk in the modification shop of a mobile training unit—the forerunner of today's field training detachments—and he soon became a supply specialist. In that capacity, he ordered the first jet engine the Air Force used to make mockups for trainers. He found the work interesting and considered going to technical school.

A brief hospital stay to treat a shoulder problem, however, changed his direction. Kisling was told that regulations for patients being released allowed him to go wherever there was an opening in his specialty. The sergeant in the processing unit told Kisling about “the nicest little base in the Army Air Forces. Beautiful airfield and the weather is nice year 'round.” Kisling headed west to Hamilton Field, California—a hasty choice and a major turning point in his professional and personal life.

When he arrived at Hamilton in June 1948, “they put me in the enlisted branch at Headquarters, Fourth Air Force,” Kisling said. “At that time, we didn't have personnel specialties—we were classification specialists. The branch chief, MSgt. Donald Shank, had a hell of a good training program.” Shank trained his men in all phases of personnel work and took a personal interest in them. “He was a strong, positive role model—the first such military supervisor I had,” Kisling said. Under Shank's tutelage, Kisling decided he had finally found his preferred career field. He liked helping to resolve problems while dealing with people one-on-one. While still at Hamilton, he married Alene O'Dell on July 2, 1949, and their life-long partnership began.

Kisling volunteered for the European theater and went to Wheelus Field, Tripoli, Libya, in April 1950. He was assigned to the 1261st Air Transport Squadron, Military Air Transport Services. It was not the post he had wanted, but the assignment turned out well. “I went in there as a staff sergeant and was promoted rather quickly to tech sergeant. After about six or seven months as the chief clerk in the squadron, I moved up to become the first sergeant,” Kisling said. That promotion was unexpected. “The squadron commander and the first sergeant didn't get along,” Kisling remembered. “The commander called me in and said, ‘Tomorrow morning, you're the first sergeant. If you can do the job, you're a master. If not, I am going to bust you to staff sergeant.’” He did the job and left Wheelus in March 1952 as a master sergeant.



During his two-year assignment at Wheelus Field in Tripoli, Libya, Kisling (shown above in 1951) was promoted from staff sergeant to tech sergeant to first sergeant to master sergeant.

Kisling next reported to West Palm Beach, Florida, with three Air Force specialty codes: first sergeant, personnel, and administration. But again his expectations did not match the outcome:

In 1952, you didn't know what your job was going to be when you went to a base. I reported to the base personnel office and the NCOIC [noncommissioned officer in charge] said, "Sarge, I will give you two choices—you can go to the military police squadron or you can have the food service job." That is really a choice? I thought I was going to a flying squadron. So I took the food service squadron. I ended up having the only outfit on base that was still standing reveille. We had a lot of AWOLs [absent without leave] and all sorts of disciplinary problems. It was a rough outfit.

Six months later, he welcomed a transfer to the 1739th Ferrying Squadron in Amarillo, Texas. Although Kisling was assigned as the first sergeant, the unit's commander had something else in mind. He asked Kisling to run the personnel department, breaking it away from the orderly room and running it independently. Kisling accepted and was back in the career field he enjoyed.

In February 1954, he applied for duty with the recruiting service and went to Abilene, Texas, for an interview. The Southwestern Recruiting District needed someone right away, so ten days later the Kislings headed for Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. At that time, Army

and Air Force recruiting efforts were combined, and they shared the same stations; but, shortly after Kisling's arrival, the two separated. Air Force recruiting moved to Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, to set up recruiting school and the 3504th Recruiting Group. Although Kisling did not work in the field as a recruiter, his contributions to the unit were recognized in 1956, when he was named Outstanding Support Airman of the Year for the Air Force Recruiting Service.

While the Kislings lived in Texas, their two daughters were born—Kathy in Amarillo and Karen in San Antonio. The old Wherry quarters at Lackland were crowded for the family, so Kisling used his last reenlistment bonus of \$1,300 as a down payment on a small house. There were a lot of new expenses, and Kisling did what so many enlisted personnel have done over the years: he moonlighted to supplement his \$300 monthly take-home pay. Selling vacuum cleaners door-to-door in the evenings and on Saturdays, he made more money than he did as a master sergeant.

After almost four years in Texas, Kisling was a prime candidate for an overseas assignment. Once again, he volunteered for Europe and received orders to the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing, Chaumont, France. This was his first Air Force combat unit and one of the first bases where the concept of a consolidated personnel office was being tested.

They were flying F-86 planes and later transitioned to F-100s. It was different. When I got there I was the personnel sergeant major for the air base group. It wasn't long before we took the records out of the groups and consolidated them all, and I became the base personnel sergeant major. I think it served a purpose during that time, although I have always felt we were better off with the records in the squadrons. I feel we lost a lot of the personal, individualized touch when we consolidated.

In September 1958, Kisling was promoted to senior master sergeant in the first group of Air Force people to wear the supergrades.

When his three-year assignment in France ended in 1959, Kisling and his family returned to the United States and to an assignment as the base personnel sergeant major at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. His office was the test site for Tactical Air Command's consolidated base personnel office. In December 1959, when the Air Force announced its first promotions to the new rank of chief master sergeant, Kisling was on the list. In recognition of his efforts at Nellis, he was also named Twelfth Air Force Outstanding Airman of the Year.

Kisling began thinking about retiring with twenty years of service. Interested in settling where he and Alene would enjoy retirement, he took a position as a technical adviser to the Reserves at March Air Force Base in California. The Kislings bought a house, expecting to establish some roots at last. But Reserve headquarters converted all the personnel adviser authorizations to maintenance, ending Kisling's tour only a year after his arrival.

Because he wanted to stay in California, he found a job as base personnel sergeant major at George Air Force Base, where the first F-105 wing, the 335th Tactical Fighter Wing, was forming. When the Cuban missile crisis erupted in October 1962, the base went on alert and deployed planes, with pilots and support people ready around the clock. The threat of war was very real, and military members and their families were caught up in the uncertainty and potential chaos.

A year later, Kisling had decided to stay in the service, and he sought one more overseas tour—this time with an assignment at Security Service. There were openings in Turkey and Germany, and the Kislings chose Germany. He became the personnel sergeant major for the European Security Region in Frankfurt. The new job meant traveling two weeks a month, making technical personnel visits, and talking with first sergeants and troops about assignments, billeting, and other issues.

When his tour in Germany ended in 1967, Kisling was assigned to U.S. Air Force Security Service headquarters (USAFSS) at Kelly Air Force Base, Texas. That same year, the Air Force selected its first chief master sergeant of the Air Force. The new program and position caught Kisling's attention, and he told his family that it was the job he most wanted. Two years later, he was USAFSS's nominee for that position. Don Harlow was selected, and Kisling was chosen to fill a new role—USAFSS senior enlisted adviser. The USAFSS commander charged him with learning what the enlisted people were thinking and how the personnel programs were working. Kisling believed that his efforts in this new job would better qualify him to become the chief master sergeant of the Air Force, if he were nominated again:

To a degree [I was] really an IG [inspector general] because I went out and found out about any problems. I came back from trips with a fistful of things to talk about—from living conditions to training issues—anything in the book that the troops wanted to talk about. Back at Kelly, I'd talk to the general. I didn't have to make written reports, which was good. It was a simple thing of going in and having an outbrief with him, the chief of staff, and the deputy commander—then going to the directorates.

Career motivation was always a part of it. I talked to a lot of people one-on-one to explain what the Air Force had to offer and why they should stay in for a whole career.

In 1971, Kisling was again the USAFSS's nominee to be the next chief master sergeant of the Air Force. Twenty-four other chiefs competed for the position, and, when the field narrowed, Kisling was one of three finalists chosen to go to the Pentagon for an interview. Two weeks later, he was named the chief master sergeant of the Air Force.

Once in the Pentagon, Kisling went to his new boss, Gen. John D. Ryan. Kisling told him that he believed that in order to go out to the field and talk about what was happening at the chief of staff level, he and the general needed to meet regularly. General Ryan responded



When Air Force Chief of Staff John D. Ryan (at the center) started to pin CMSAF Kisling's new brass in the wrong place, Kisling's wife, Alene, gave him some good-natured help.

that he wanted to meet with Kisling every ten days to two weeks. With that in mind, Kisling then tackled his new job.⁴

His first challenge involved the long list of bases requesting a visit from the chief master sergeant of the Air Force. At many of these bases, service personnel expected him to be able to discuss particular issues and problems. Kisling set about learning all he could about the Air Staff's position on those issues and problems before leaving on his visits. As he noted, "I could see nothing worse than the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force arriving at a base and in a meeting unable to answer the questions or provide the rationale for the decisions."⁵

As he undertook his new role, Kisling found an enlisted force struggling through the development of a new Air Force. "We had become too sophisticated and centralized," the chief noted. "We expected people to be highly technical specialists, supervisors, and NCOs, without the benefit of adequate training and experience. We needed to develop our NCOs like we did our officers. We depended on the process of osmosis, if you will, to teach them. Most [senior NCOs] felt we needed a first-class PME system for our enlisted force." So Kisling placed those concerns in the forefront of discussion at the Pentagon. His persistence paid off when the first Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy was approved by Congress in the

autumn of 1972, and officially opened its doors at Gunter Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama, the following January.

In an interview, Kisling was asked if he believed there was any significance to the fact that the Senior NCO Academy was located at Gunter Air Force Base rather than at nearby Maxwell Air Force Base, the home of Air University. Kisling believed that a lack of space was the prime reason for locating the academy at Gunter rather than Maxwell. He further stated that in hindsight the decision to locate at Gunter was a good one. He believed that it helped the new school. "I think it probably has more prestige being away from the officers, separated from the rest of A[ir] U[niversity]." Maxwell did not offer the office, classroom, or billeting facilities such a school needed. At Gunter, the Air Force constructed what Kisling described as a "first-class facility" for a "first-class school." He also noted that noncommissioned officers from the other services who attended school at Gunter rated the Air Force school as "just head and shoulders above the rest."⁶

Before the Senior NCO Academy accepted its first students, however, Kisling had one more battle to fight:

There was a lot of talk about making [this academy strictly for] first sergeants. I felt all of our senior NCOs needed this type of professional military education; to limit it to only one career field would be wrong for the entire Air Force. The Senior NCO Academy should be putting the finishing touches on these people. It should be the equivalent of Air War College.

These...[academy graduates] came back to their units...better qualified and motivated. They certainly had their horizons broadened and, in many cases, they were more ambitious than they ever were before. It was the best thing that happened to the Air Force in thirty years.

The academy was a giant step forward in education and personnel development, but Kisling strongly believed that there was more to leadership and management than what was taught in a classroom. He saw management as a subset of leadership, not as a separate endeavor.

Kisling had learned from his three enlisted supervisors that a true leader treats people with respect, is honest and sincere in his dealings with them, and exudes leadership twenty-four hours a day, without being caught up in his own importance. Describing his commitment to effective and humane leadership, the Enlisted Council of the Air Force Association wrote this about Kisling:

The effective leader takes the time to listen: 'Even if you already know what someone is going to say, you have to let them put it into their own words,' the chief said. Chief

Kisling has always maintained that people are of great importance, and that a proper concern for them as individuals is a prime quality of every outstanding leader.

Like most of his generation, Kisling learned leadership fundamentals through experience. Since he had not had an opportunity to attend any professional military education courses, he considered himself extremely fortunate to have been on the first selection list for promotion to chief master sergeant.

He believed that, prior to the mid-1970s, the Air Force did a good job of technical training but a poor job of professional military development for the total enlisted force. In a 1972 interview, he said, "A lot of our young Air Force people have never had a serious conversation with an adult. They have never talked about their objectives in life or expressed their personal feelings. Professional military education alone is not enough to mould NCOs because an individual has to be in a situation where he can see leadership by example."

He also believed that many enlisted people did not understand how they fit within the Air Force as a whole. He noted that

We had people who were specialists. They really didn't understand their job, how their job contributed to what the Air Force was doing, what the Air Force mission was. They couldn't see that the supply guy at Kincheloe Air Force Base [Michigan] didn't understand that his job was very important to making sure those birds were launched every day. If he didn't do his job right, someone didn't get the supplies whether it be in the housing or wherever.⁷

Kisling believed that by the time he finished his tour as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, the office had grown and the Air Staff had come to realize more of its value. He saw that the Air Staff increasingly included him in briefings on issues before taking final action.⁸

Kisling retired on September 30, 1973. Staying involved in Air Force activities, he worked for the Air Force Sergeants Association for eighteen months and then went back to the Pentagon's directorate of personnel as a management specialist and program analyst. He was still employed by the Air Force when he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease in January 1985. He died on November 3, 1985. Throughout four decades of military service, Kisling's efforts helped improve the quality of life for the enlisted force. His concern for such enlisted issues as housing, pay, promotions, education and training, and assignments earned him the respect of his peers and the nickname, "the GI's man in Washington."

The hallways of the Senior NCO Academy at Maxwell Air Force Base-Gunter Annex reflect Kisling's contributions and forethought. In 1986, Kisling Hall was dedicated to the former CMSAF in recognition of his tireless efforts to promote professional military education. In 1995, a life-size bronze statue of the chief was added to the lobby of the academy—a

memorial made possible by contributions from civilians and from members of every part of the Air Force.

At the statue's dedication ceremony, Gen. Billy Boles, commander of the Air Education and Training Command, credited Kisling with establishing many Air Force programs that benefit enlisted members: "He knew what to do, . . . and he knew how to do it and make everyone come out a winner," the general said. "No one ever lost an argument with Dick Kisling. He always had his way, and you thought it was your idea. He did that with gentle persuasion."

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographic interview is based on material researched and compiled by SSgt. Ginger Schreitmueller.

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

3. Enlisted Council, Air Force Association, *The Chiefs*, p. 17.

4. Oral History Interview of CMSAF Richard D. Kisling, by Hugh Ahmann, December 14, 1982, June 13, 1983, and September 11 and October 4, 1984, typed transcript, pp. 224–25, K239.0512–1363, IRIS No. 1070822, in USAF Collection, AFHRA.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 298.