Paul W. Airey

April 3, 1967–July 31, 1969

Paul Wesley Airey became the first chief master sergeant of the Air Force on April 3, 1967.[1] Lyndon B. Johnson was President of the United States, Harold Brown was the secretary of the Air Force, and Gen. John P. McConnell was the Air Force chief of staff. During Airey's little more than two-year term, U.S. involvement in Vietnam reached a peak, in terms of the troops involved and, in many ways, of the protests against the war. The number of enlisted personnel in the Air Force reached 761,507 in 1968 before falling slightly to 722,507 in 1969.[2]

Paul Airey was born on December 13, 1923, and was raised in Quincy, Massachusetts, an overwhelmingly Navy town. During World War II, Quincy's Fore River Shipyard operated at full tilt, producing such famous ships as the USS *Wasp* and the USS *Quincy*. In that booming atmosphere, Airey's earliest plan was to join the Navy. At age eighteen, less than year after Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Airey quit high school to enlist. An unpleasant experience with a Navy recruiter, however, changed his mind about that branch of the service. He opted instead to enlist in the Army Air Forces on November 16, 1942—a decision he never regretted.[3]

Airey went to accelerated basic training in Atlantic City and at Brigantine Field, New Jersey. "The entire town of Atlantic City was taken over by the Army Air Forces for basic training," Airey recalled. "All of the hotels were used by the various squadrons." Basic trainees learned close order drill and customs and courtesies—the usual subjects that went into the making of a soldier. Airey said trainees also were given a significant responsibility: "We had complete blackouts on the coast to prevent our ships from showing up as silhouettes out on the water," he said. "Due to this action, and to the fact that the Germans had landed some spies on the east coast, we also trained to patrol the famous Atlantic City boardwalk against a German landing."

Airey left basic training for radio operator school at Scott Field, Illinois. Following a promotion to private first class, he went to aerial gunnery school at Tyndall Field, Florida. When he graduated from that school in August 1943, newly promoted Sergeant Airey and his classmates traveled by troop train to Salt Lake Army Air Base, Utah, for crew assignment and refresher training in radio operation. His crew was assigned to Gowen Field, Idaho, for B–24

transition training and eventually reported to Fairmont Army Air Base, Nebraska, to help form and activate the 485th Bombardment Group. Airey was promoted to staff sergeant while at Fairmont.

By March 1944, Airey and the 485th Bombardment Group were on their way to join the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy, via Puerto Rico, British Guiana, Brazil, Senegal, and Tunis in Tunisia. "On the leg from Atkinson Field, British Guiana, to Belém, Brazil, the radio operator was issued a coop with some pigeons," Airey said. "It was a long stretch across the Amazon jungle. [If] you went down, there was no radio equipment that you could use, so we had pigeons to use in case we crashed in the jungle. We lost several planes in the Amazon Basin during those years. I guess those pigeons logged many an hour going back and forth."

The crew stopped in Tunis for two months to await the completion of a runway in Italy. There, for the first time, the war struck close to Airey:

> …something happened that had a profound effect on me…. It started out as rumor that the convoy which most of my squadron was coming over on was hit by German planes in the Mediterranean Sea and the whole shipload was lost. This was very strongly denied as a vicious rumor. Rumors aided the enemy. Those who spread rumors could be court-martialed. However,…it was all true; we lost the entire squadron. The ship was carrying gasoline and explosives and received a direct hit shortly after nightfall. There were no survivors. My entire squadron had disappeared—all the ground crews, the orderly room—there was no one left.[4]

Once in Europe, Airey flew missions to some of the most heavily defended targets in Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Romania. Airey once flew over Ploesti, though he was not on the mission that made it famous. He remembered the flak as both frightening and frustrating—all one could do was watch it. While he never saw it so thick that you could walk on it, as some grimly joked, he did see "it so thick that it darkened the sky, almost blotted out the sun." Once at the initial point, aircrews were not allowed to take evasive action because they had to fly in formation to the target. "Flak took a terrible toll, and many thousands of casualties could be attributed to it. Thousands of POWs [Prisoners of War] could testify that flak was what got them." A few months after arriving in Europe, Technical Sergeant Airey and the crew were shot down on his twenty-eighth mission. Their B–24 was hit by flak shortly after they bombed oil refineries on the outskirts of Vienna, Austria. "I can recall the pilot feathering one engine and then another," said Airey. "By this time, we were well across the Danube [River] over Hungary." The oil pressure in a third engine started going down, and the pilot ordered everyone to get out because, as they all knew, the B–24 could not fly on one engine and would go into a spin.[5]

Airey and his wife, Shirley Babbitt Airey, on their wedding day, February 10, 1946

Airey had hoped that the crew members would be able to get out if their aircraft were ever hit. "I'd seen other planes go down over a target," Airey recalled.

> I'd seen B–24s go into a spin. I'd stood at the waist window praying for the chutes to come out, and no chutes would come out. Centrifugal force prevented them from bailing out.… So when the pilot said, 'Go,' there was no hesitation on my part. Right out the camera hatch I went.[6]

All of the crew members got out. They bailed out at 18,000 feet—so high that Airey had time to tear up his radio operator code card and look for possible places to hide after landing. The welcome on the ground was not friendly. "I never got out of my harness," Airey remembered. "I landed, and they were waiting for me, and I received some punches. They were very angry. I was happy to see the authorities show up." Airey and his fellow crew members were rounded up and incarcerated for several days in a large civilian prison in Budapest. After processing, they were placed in groups of twenty and taken by train to Stalag Luft IV, a POW camp for Allied airmen near Gross Tychow, in German Pomerania, now part of Poland, a journey that lasted several days.

"The first thing that struck home was the fact that I knew so many people who were already POWs," Airey said. "To a degree, it was comforting to be around old friends, even if we had to meet under those circumstances."

On February 6, 1945, Airey and six thousand other prisoners were ordered to march west from Stalag Luft IV to an unknown destination. "The Germans didn't want us to fall into Russian hands," he said, "so they herded us around. Nearly ninety days later, we were still marching, with only a short layover at Stalag 11B. It was pretty primitive. We stayed in barns at night, sometimes out in open fields; sometimes we were fed and sometimes we weren't."

Men died from disease, malnutrition, exposure, and exhaustion before their liberation by the British Second Army on May 2, 1945. When he was freed, Airey was suffering from dysentery and weighed less than one hundred pounds. He was taken to France and then spent three months on recuperation leave in the United States.

Following his experiences in World War II, Airey remained firmly grounded in the principles of duty, honor, and devotion to country. "Even as a prisoner of war," he said, "I was

giving much consideration to staying in the military. I liked it. There was something about it I wanted. I came back from that recuperation leave and reenlisted."

Though Airey found much about the military to admire, there were certain features of his early career he was glad to see fade into the past. When Airey entered the military, for example, the men with whom he had served ranged from college graduates to those who could not read or write. The latter would never be allowed in the U.S. Air Force today, he noted. In addition, in the 1940s, local judges often "sentenced" men to the military. And military prisoners were paroled in order to come on active duty. Travel between duty stations also left much to be desired. During the war, Airey and his fellow soldiers frequently endured long and uncomfortable trips by troop trains and transports. During the 1940s and into the 1950s, enlisted personnel had to report to a pay table once a month to receive their pay. Depending on the size of the unit, this activity could take up an entire day. The state of medical care in the 1940s through the 1950s was also different. Airey believed that many airmen worked while sick because of the perception they would be seen as "malingering" or "goldbricking" if they went on sick call. Doctors during that era were considered officers, rather than medics, and were referred to by rank, not by the title doctor. This led to a military atmosphere and not the doctor-to-patient relationship that Airey sees in military medicine today. And until the mid 1950s, the military was not required to provide medical care to military dependents.[7]

But the positives outweighed the negatives, and Airey decided to stay in the service. After the war, he married his high school sweetheart, Shirley Babbitt. He spent the next six years as a radio school instructor at what in 1948 became Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. He was promoted to master sergeant in 1948 and was sent to Naha Air Base, Okinawa, in 1951. As noncommissioned officer in charge (NCOIC) of wing communications, he devised a corrosion control assembly line for aircraft radio and radar equipment and, as a result, was awarded the Legion of Merit for saving money and extending equipment life.

In 1953, Airey was offered a position he would later believe to be one of the most important in the Air Force. He took the job of squadron first sergeant at Scott Air Force Base. During the next twelve years, he served as first sergeant, guiding airmen and noncommissioned officers, at the 3318th Training Squadron, Scott Air Force Base; the 3407th School Squadron, Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi; the 611th Aircraft Control and Warning Site, a remote base in the mountains on the Chiba Peninsula, Japan, where he was promoted to senior master sergeant in 1960; the 478th Fighter Group, 468th CAMRON (Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance) Squadron, Grand Forks Air Force Base, North Dakota, where he was promoted to chief master sergeant in 1962; the 18th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, Grand Forks; and the 4756th Civil Engineering Squadron, Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida.

"I still think the first sergeant is a key position in the United States Air Force today. As much emphasis should be placed on that position as possible," Airey said. The first sergeants

Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown (left), CMSAF Paul Airey, and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John Paul McConnell at Airey's installation ceremony

of today must deal with day-to-day leadership and discipline problems, and they must also deal with families. Unlike in the early years of the Air Force, now the majority of enlisted personnel are married. Airey also noted that the first sergeants must be able to deal with both men and women. First sergeants must know their jobs and be able to offer help when needed. They must also know when they cannot offer help, and when they need to look elsewhere for assistance. Airey stated that the first sergeant must be a role model and must always keep as the top priority the welfare of the enlisted people. However, the first sergeant must balance that with the realization that the mission of the unit and the mission of the Air Force are paramount. "My many years as a first sergeant was of great help for me when becoming the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force."[8]

He also believed that establishing the position of senior enlisted adviser was a major advancement for the enlisted forces:

The establishment of the Senior Enlisted Adviser (SEA)—now Command Chief Master Sergeant—was a major development in upgrading the enlisted force. The position places a senior NCO in direct contact with a commander, which enables the SEA to represent the enlisted people in the command on all matters pertaining to health, welfare, morale, discipline, and organizational problems. It is also a training ground for future Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force.[9]

Airey realized that, in addition to his service as a first sergeant, education was essential to advancement and preparation for higher rank. When stationed at Scott Air Force Base, he earned an associate degree in business administration at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois. He took follow-on courses at the University of North Dakota and Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida.

When Airey was appointed chief master sergeant of the Air Force in 1967, he was the first such noncommissioned officer charged with the responsibility of aiding and advising the secretary of the Air Force and the Air Force chief of staff on all matters pertaining to enlisted service members.

Before his appointment, Airey never expected he would get the position: "I thought, 'Whoever gets that job is really going to have to go through a lot. What a great honor it would be.' But I didn't think I had any chance of being selected." According to Airey, twenty-two hundred chief master sergeants were eligible for the job at the first selection. Several records reviews and in-person board interviews reduced the number to twenty-two semifinalists. From that number, three were chosen: Conrad Stevens, from Military Airlift Command (MAC); "Red" Marsh, from Pacific Air Forces (PACAF); and Airey. They went to Washington, D.C., and were interviewed by several senior officers, including the vice chief of staff, Gen. Bruce Holloway, and the chief of staff, Gen. John P. McConnell, who selected Airey as the first chief master sergeant of the Air Force.

Of his selection, Airey remarked, "I can honestly say of the twenty-two hundred, I never will be convinced that I was the most qualified or the most eligible. I ended up with the job—so you go out and do the best you can."

Almost immediately upon assuming his new responsibilities, Airey began tackling the problem of personnel retention, an issue he identified as one of the greatest challenges he faced. The first-term reenlistment rate was the lowest it had been in twelve years. While fighting raged in Vietnam, the Air Force was battling to retain 25 percent of its first-term enlisted force. Airey, however, did not attribute the great decline in reenlistments to the unpopularity of the war in Vietnam. Rather, he saw it as a consequence of a number of issues, including "poor pay, numerous remote assignments, good civilian employment opportunities, and an inequitable promotion system."[10]

"We had people who were in grade for ten years or more, in frozen career fields with absolutely no opportunity for promotion," he recalled. The Air Force had what was referred to as "hard-core" and "soft-core" career fields, terms that Airey despised because he believed that it took all career fields to make the Air Force a viable team.

Airey was informed that Representative L. Mendel Rivers (D., South Carolina), who then chaired the House Armed Services Committee, began receiving thousands of letters from embittered enlisted people regarding promotions. He formed a subcommittee to investigate the services' enlisted promotion systems. That investigation resulted in some criticism of

the Air Force's promotion system. To tackle the problem, the service assembled a team, on which Airey acted as an adviser. His efforts helped to produce the Weighted Airman Promotion System, which eliminated the old local enlisted promotion boards and equalized promotion opportunities across career fields. It established clear, weighted criteria for promotion, including test scores and time-in-grade. Airey, who remembered the days of local promotion boards when promotion depended in many cases on how well one did within a "fair-haired boy" system, noted that WAPS is the most equitable promotion system for enlisted personnel in any of the U.S. armed services. With minor changes, the WAPS adopted in 1970 remains in effect today.

Though he applauded the Weighted Airman Promotion System, Airey did not agree with all of the measures taken to enhance retention. He believed that the Air Force lowered standards, and he strongly objected to the decision to create the "buck sergeant" rank, giving E–4s noncommissioned officer status. Even though retention did go up once that decision was put into effect, Airey stated, "I do not believe it was the right way to go."[11]

Airey was also a strong advocate for enlisted professional military education. He believed that senior and chief master sergeants needed more advanced management training than was available at the major command academies, and he suggested that an Air Force-level senior noncommissioned officer academy be established.

"I looked upon it more as an inducement, something to strive for," Airey said. "It would be the tops in professional military education, and one who went through it should graduate with much pride." Establishment of the academy was not approved until 1971, two years after Airey stepped down from the Air Force's top enlisted position. The Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy opened at Gunter Annex, Alabama, in 1973.

During his tenure as chief master sergeant of the Air Force, Airey made four visits to Vietnam, twice with the chief of staff and twice on his own. He always came back from these trips feeling proud of what he had seen and of what the troops were doing.[12]

After completing his twenty-seven-month term as CMSAF, Airey returned to Tyndall Air Force Base as the first sergeant of a combat crew training squadron because he wanted to complete thirty years of service. He is the only former chief master sergeant of the Air Force to have remained on active duty.

Airey is very proud of the enlisted force of the early twenty-first century. He notes, "We have young airmen performing duties that are being done by field grade officers in foreign air forces. The NCO force is the best it has ever been and we are the envy of foreign air forces all over the world."[13]

Airey and his wife, Shirley, stayed in the Florida panhandle after he retired. He became the regional director of the Air Force Sergeants Association and held that position for ten years. He now spends most of his time on speaking engagements for the Air Force. He is also a member of the Air University Foundation, a member of the board of trustees for the Airmen

Memorial Museum, and a member of the Airmen Memorial Foundation. The Aireys have three children and two grandchildren.

Airey lived his values of duty, honor, and devotion to country, and, as the first chief master sergeant of the Air Force, he instilled the same desire in many other service members. On the day he took office, he told his fellow airmen the following:

> I pledge myself to work for ever better utilization of the more than three quarters of a million Air Force enlisted members. I am particularly interested in the areas of retention, career development, educational progression, and civic responsibilities. I plan to get out and talk to airmen all over the world. In this way I hope to develop recommendations to the Chief of Staff on how we can continue to improve the working situations in which personal pride and service can best be combined to accomplish our mission.
>
> I welcome this opportunity to work toward making our Aerospace People an increasingly valuable asset to the Air Force and to the Nation.[14]

In accomplishing many of the goals he set for himself, he also firmly established the position of chief master sergeant of the Air Force. He faced the critics and—while he did not win over everyone—convinced many of the importance and value of the position.

He is very proud that his oldest son, Dale Paul Airey, followed him into the Air Force and flew over eleven hundred combat sorties as a loadmaster on a C–123 with the 19th Special Operations Squadron out of Tan Son Nhut Air Base in South Vietnam. Dale later became commandant of two leadership schools and retired as a first sergeant with the rank of chief master sergeant. He now teaches in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.[15]

When asked about his greatest accomplishments, Airey demurred. He responded, "Let history answer."[16] "I did my best to do what I was trained to do," Airey said. "That's how I want to be remembered."

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, this biographical interview is based on material researched and compiled by SMSgt. Valerie McGovern.

2. Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics, Fiscal Year 2000* (Washington, D.C.: DoD, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate of Information, Operations and Reports, 2000), p. 65.

3. Janet R. Bednarek, ed., *The Enlisted Experience: A Conversation with the Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1995), p. 25.

4. *Ibid*., p. 31.

5. *Ibid*., p. 32.

6. *Ibid*., pp. 32–33.

7. *Ibid*.., pp. 27, 41, 80–81.

8. As part of this project, each surviving former chief master sergeant of the Air Force was presented with a copy of the biographical interview and a questionnaire. They were asked to make changes and corrections to the interview and to answer the questionnaire. They were allowed to respond to the questionnaire in the manner easiest for them. Some responded by telephone, some by tape recording, some by e-mail, and some in writing. CMSAF Airey chose to provide a handwritten response to his questionnaire (hereinafter Airey Questionnaire). A copy of the Airey Questionnaire and Airey's response are available in the files of the Office of Air Force History, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C.

9. Airey Questionnaire.

10. Enlisted Council, Air Force Association, *The Chiefs* (Arlington, Va.: Air Force Association, 1984), p. 11.

11. Bednarek, *The Enlisted Experience*, p. 107.

12. Airey Questionnaire.

13. *Ibid*.

14. United States Air Force, *Information Sheet*, "Statement by Chief Master Sergeant Paul W. Airey, First Chief Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force," SAF-OIPC, Pentagon, Washington, D.C., OXford 7–9835.

15. Airey Questionnaire.

16. *Ibid*.