



The 15th Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force has some timely advice for today's airmen.

Chief McKinley



USAF photo

By Peter Grier

The new Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Rodney J. McKinley, has this message for younger members of the Air Force: Don't model your career after mine.

It could turn out to be valuable advice at a time of force reductions and uncertainty about the future of careers.

Back in 1977, when the Air Force was getting smaller as a result of a force reduction not unlike today's, the service was handing incentive packages to airmen who chose to leave. Rodney McKinley had been in the military for only three years—and he'd been offered what seemed like a good paying job, helping to run a

CMSAF Rodney McKinley speaks to airmen at Lincoln Airpark, Neb. The airmen are based at Offutt Air Force Base.



Lt. Gen. Arthur Lichte, USAF assistant vice chief of staff, congratulates McKinley after the ceremony making him the 15th Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.

popular restaurant outside the gates of Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C.

So McKinley took the buyout and returned to civilian life.

He soon learned, however, that his civilian paycheck wasn't that impressive after all, especially when computed on a per-hour basis. The benefits left a lot to be desired as well.

An avid golfer, McKinley the airman had paid \$90 per year to play all he wanted on the Seymour Johnson course. As a civilian, rounds were costing him \$26 for each outing.

He also missed the Air Force camaraderie, and he wanted more security for his family. And so, after five years as a civilian, in 1982, he re-enlisted.

The lesson McKinley learned from this experience? Don't make uninformed decisions that affect your future.

"It's a good example of, 'Don't do what I did,'" he says. "If you choose to be a civilian, that's OK, as long as you weigh out all the factors."

Tough Times

That is advice many in the Air Force will need to consider as the service faces downsizing and an overall personnel transformation that could be the biggest in the service since it was founded in 1947.

"I recognize I'm stepping into this job at a very difficult time," says McKinley today.

As the 15th Chief Master Sergeant

of the Air Force, McKinley is the top noncommissioned officer in the Air Force and the chief advisor on enlisted matters to Gen. T. Michael Moseley, the Chief of Staff. He was promoted on June 30 and took over the position from CMSAF Gerald R. Murray. Murray retired after four years in the post and 29 overall years of service.

A native of Mount Orab, Ohio, McKinley grew up a country boy, according to own his description. "I've baled a lot of hay," he says.

He enlisted in the Air Force with a buddy in the fall of 1973. As a youth, he'd dreamed of a medical career, so he sought, and was granted, a job as a medic. He ended up working in hospital emergency rooms.

"I really enjoyed it," says McKinley. "It was even better than I had thought it would be."

It was gratifying to see how his job in the Air Force affected people's lives for the better. He could take pride in such things as suturing up a cut so it would heal without a scar and helping sick kids get better.

"One of the lessons I learned being a medic is perspective," he says. "A lot of things I do today are not life and death. If a report is late, it's important we get it in, but it is not really life and death."

After leaving the Air Force in 1977, he eventually found himself back in his hometown. He attended nursing school during the day and at night helped run the emergency room at the hospital in which he was born.

When he re-entered the service in 1982, McKinley knew that this time he would be fully committed to a military career. Because of his prior experience and private-sector training, McKinley assumed that he would be assigned to work at something in the health care field.

He was wrong. At the time, the only openings for prior-service personnel were in the weapons and crew chief fields. So he opted to become a crew chief—and decided he would work



McKinley shakes hands with a new airman at Lackland AFB, Tex., on Aug. 7. McKinley spoke at the ceremony, which marked the transition of trainees at Lackland into airmen.

to become the best crew chief he could be.

“Whatever job the Air Force gave me, my goal was always to do the best that I possibly could,” says McKinley.

He was happy as a crew chief, but in 1990 the Air Force threw him another curve—one of the aircraft that he knew best, the F-4, was going to transition out of service.

Cross Train or Die

“They told me to either cross train or get out. I chose to become a first sergeant,” says McKinley.

The change enabled him to learn yet another set of skills. First sergeants have to know what is going on and take care of airmen and their families. This was the job he performed for a decade, until his promotion in 2001 to command chief master sergeant for the 86th Airlift Wing at Ramstein AB, Germany.

The lessons from his first sergeant experience have been “invaluable,” says McKinley. “Almost everything I do now is related to my 10 years as a first sergeant.”

In Qatar during Operation Iraqi Freedom, McKinley served as command chief for the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, a force that generated more than 4,000 sorties.

Following that, he was promoted to command chief master sergeant of 11th Air Force, Elmendorf AFB,

15 Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force	
Paul W. Airey	April 1967 - July 1969
Donald L. Harlow	August 1969 - September 1971
Richard D. Kisling	October 1971 - September 1973
Thomas N. Barnes	October 1973 - July 1977
Robert D. Gaylor	August 1977 - July 1979
James M. McCoy	August 1979 - July 1981
Arthur L. Andrews	August 1981 - July 1983
Sam E. Parish	August 1983 - June 1986
James C. Binnicker	July 1986 - July 1990
Gary R. Pfingston	August 1990 - October 1994
David J. Campanale	October 1994 - November 1996
Eric W. Benken	November 1996 - July 1999
Frederick J. Finch	July 1999 - July 2002
Gerald R. Murray	July 2002 - June 2006
Rodney J. McKinley	June 2006 - present

Alaska. In March 2005, McKinley was named command chief master sergeant, Pacific Air Forces, at Hickam AFB, Hawaii.

Only a few months later, he was picked for his present post.

“Any number of chief master sergeants could have been selected” as Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, McKinley says. “Now that I’m here, I have a great responsibility to all the airmen and their families out there.”

Travel is a big part of being the Air

Force’s top enlisted person. Within weeks of assuming the job, McKinley had toured bases in the San Antonio area, visited Peterson AFB, Colo., to get a look at what the Air Force is doing in space, and attended an Air Force Week celebration in St. Louis that included a Cardinals game at the city’s new downtown stadium.

“My goal is not just to go out and make appearances,” says McKinley. “I’ll be at the places I need to be to represent the Air Force.”

He is not planning big changes from his predecessor’s approach. The top job, McKinley says, is to focus on the Air Force’s three priorities: winning the War on Terror, taking care of airmen, and modernizing the force.

One thing he does emphasize is the importance of recognizing the needs of and providing leadership for junior enlisted airmen.

“I want supervisors to take a greater role in taking care of their airmen,” says McKinley.

That includes reminding the airmen that when they are deployed to foreign countries, they become representatives of both the Air Force and the United States. Bad behavior harms not just themselves, but their country.

“We have fantastic core values of integrity, service, and excellence,” says McKinley. Airmen need to not just quote those values, but practice them, especially when on temporary duty assignments in other countries, he says.



McKinley addresses airmen at an enlisted call at Offutt.



CMSgt. David Popp (far left), ACC's command chief, answers a question during an Air Force Association Air & Space Conference professional development forum. McKinley led the panel of six command chief master sergeants.

Enlistees across the Air Force should be proud to be airmen, he adds. That means proud in their work, proud in their behavior, proud of the uniform. Junior enlistees are not “kids,” or “troops,” but airmen—as integral a part of the service as four-star generals.

“We should all have a lot of pride in our heritage,” he says.

McKinley himself had a chance to appreciate the Air Force’s heritage when he visited the site of the new Air Force Memorial, near the Pentagon, this summer. With Moseley, he signed a stainless steel segment that was placed at the tip of one of the spires that make up the memorial’s soaring design.

“That was just a humbling experience,” says McKinley.

Those 40,000 Cuts

The new chief has assumed his job at a time when the force is being drastically reshaped. The Air Force is committed to shedding the equivalent of 40,000 full-time personnel in an effort to become more efficient and gain the resources necessary to modernize an aircraft fleet that is now the oldest in service history.

Some commissioned officers are being told they have to go in 2007. Because of that, they will get separation pay. (See “Aerospace World: Air Force RIFs Lieutenants,” July, p. 18.)

But under current plans, the enlisted force will not be trimmed in the same involuntary fashion next year, according to McKinley. The Air Force will bring fewer recruits into basic training

and is going to take some people in overmanned career fields and ask them to cross train into fields that are now short of personnel.

“If we find we cannot get the numbers out the way we want, we will probably have to go out and ask for legislation allowing us to pay [enlisted] people to leave,” says McKinley. “But we think we are going to get the numbers right without asking for more money.”

Today’s airmen will have to get used to accelerating change, says McKinley. They will have to be more adaptable than even he has been in his career.

For much of the time the chief has been in the service, the Air Force faced one clear enemy, the Soviet Union. Today’s military does not have that kind of certainty.

“We don’t know who the next enemy is going to be,” says McKinley. “We have to be prepared to go anywhere in the world on a moment’s notice and fight in many different ways.

“It’s a different Air Force from the one I grew up in,” the chief adds. “Our people are deploying much more than ever before,” but the personnel are up to the challenge. “Airmen today are phenomenal,” he says. ■

The Star, Wreath, and Stripes: The Early Years

The following pieces of lore come from “The Chiefs,” a 48-page study of the Office of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force and its origins. It was published in 1984 by the Air Force Association.

- The term “Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force” appeared officially for the first time, it is thought, in the language of a 1966 bill introduced by Rep. Mendel Rivers, D-S.C., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Until then, the Air Force tentatively had used the title “Sergeant Major of the Air Force” for the proposed position.

- In October 1966, the Air Force acted administratively to establish the post of CMSAF, with Gen. John P. McConnell, the Chief of Staff, announcing his decision in a letter to major air command commanders.

- Selection criteria for the first CMSAF were sent to major air commands in November 1966. Candidates were to be E-9s with a minimum of 22 years of service. Of the Air Force’s 5,900 chief master sergeants, some 2,200 met the 22-year service criterion.

- There were three finalists to become the first CMSAF. They were CMSgt. Jefferson F. “Red” Marsh of Pacific Air Forces, CMSgt. Conrad F. Stevens of Military Airlift Command, and CMSgt. Paul W. Airey of Air Defense Command. Airey was ultimately selected.

- For insignia, USAF first considered adding a third stripe atop the E-9 chevron, but that was rejected as “too much.” Ultimately, USAF decided to place a star encircled by a wreath on the interior field of the stripes. (A third stripe for all E-9s was added later.)

- Responsibilities of the CMSAF were defined officially as “to advise and assist the Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force in matters concerning enlisted members of the Air Force.”

- The term of office was originally established as two years, but it was changed in 1976 to tenure “at the discretion of the Chief of Staff.”

- In the establishment of the position, the relevant headquarters operating instruction (which later became a regulation) said that the CMSAF “takes precedence over all other enlisted members of the Air Force while serving in the position.”

- In 1977, the Air Force placed the grade of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force in its official grade chart. It also recognized “CMSAF” as the official abbreviation.

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