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RESEARCH PAPER

ON

ENLISTED STRIPES

by

MSgt Charles D. Warnock

12 JULY 1997

Do you remember how proud you felt when you sewed on your first stripe? How about when you sewed on Master Sergeant or Senior Master Sergeant? I can still recall the euphoria that surrounded me for almost a month. I would catch myself looking down at my sleeve, just to see the new stripe. However, I had never given any thought as to the origin of the stripe nor the extensive changes it has undergone. The following information will give you a better understanding of the enlisted stripe so you can in turn educate your subordinates and future leaders of the Air Force. I will begin with a brief history, and then discuss the different changes to the stripes from when the Air Force became independent in 1947, until the present stripes worn today. Before we begin discussing the changes, we need a brief history of where and how the stripe originated.

During the Revolutionary War, men from different states made up the militia. Since there were no standard uniforms for the militia at that time, it was very hard to distinguish between the soldiers. Therefore, General George Washington ordered that the sergeants would sew a strip of red cloth on their right shoulders and the corporals would wear a green strip (13:2). In 1782, General Washington created the first “official” stripe for the enlisted forces. He ordered, “Men who had served for three years with bravery, fidelity and good conduct shall wear a white chevron (stripe) on the left sleeve of the uniform coat as a badge of honor” (17:2). Can you imagine how proud they must have felt when they finally got to sew on that strip of cloth? That same feeling exists today whenever we sew on our new stripe. From that time until the present, the stripe has undergone numerous changes and colors. However, it is the changes within the Air Force since 1947 that will occupy the rest of this paper. Let's begin by looking at the changes from 1947 until 1954.

From July 1947 until 1954, the enlisted stripes underwent several major changes. The Department of the Air Force was created on 26 July 1947, which established them as a separate service from the Army. However, the enlisted stripes still maintained the look of the Army insignia. The enlisted ranks and a description of the insignia, from the lowest to the highest were as follows: Private (no stripes), Private First Class (one inverted “V” upward stripe), Corporal (two upward stripes), Sergeant (three upward stripes), Staff Sergeant (three upward stripes with one “rocker” stripe), Technical Sergeant (Three upward and two rocker stripes), Master Sergeant (three upward and three rocker stripes), and the position of First Sergeant (same as the Master Sergeant’s, but with the diamond between the upward stripes and the rocker stripes) (16:4). (See Figure 1). With the Air Force being a new and independent service, there were bigger issues at stake than developing stripes that would be distinctive to the Air Force. However, that did not mean that the Air Force was not considering new proposals for the stripes.

According to Dr. Raymond Oliver, who wrote, *Why Is The Colonel Called “Kernal?”*, for the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Force, there is no official documentation for the rational behind the design of the present Air Force stripe. However, there is the minutes of a meeting held at the Pentagon on 9 March 1948, chaired by General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff, which suggest some rational behind the stripe design. (17:4) General Vandenberg approved the proposed stripe, and it is still the basic design used by today’s Air Force. It is speculated that the designer tried to incorporate the shoulder patch worn by members of the Army Air Force during World War II and the insignia used on the aircraft. The patch featured wings with a pierced star in the center while the aircraft insignia was a star with two bars (17:4). (See Figure 2) Therefore it is highly probable that the upward turned stripes represent the wings on the patch and the star is from the aircraft insignia. The blue background would represent the sky

and the silver stripes would represent the clouds. In concept, this was rather applicable to the role of the Air Force and therefore a good representation of our history. Even though the new stripe was approved for wear, the rank structure kept the same titles until the 1950s. (See Figure 2)

In February 1950, General Vandenberg directed that from that day forth, enlisted personnel of the Air Force would be called "Airmen" to distinguish them from sailors or soldiers (3:78). But, it was not until 1952 when major changes to the rank structure took place. Based upon a desire to upgrade the responsibilities of the Non-commissioned Officer, and set them apart from the lower grades, it was determined a change was in order. The non-commissioned officer category was kept sufficiently small in number to permit them to function in more of a leadership role. Therefore, this separation mandated a change in the rank structure (7:98,231).

The titles of the ranks changed, but the actual stripes assigned to those ranks did not. The new title and stripes from bottom to top are as follows: Basic Airman (no stripe), Airman Third Class (one stripe), Airman Second Class (two stripes), Airman First Class (three stripes), Staff Sergeant (four stripes), Technical Sergeant (five stripes), and Master Sergeant (six stripes) (2:104). (See figure 3). This change deleted the rank of Sergeant. Next, a new stripe design for the new junior ranks needed to be created.

The preliminary sketches for the proposed Airmen's stripes consisted of one where the stripes were rotated to the horizontal position with the star remaining constant. That way it would reserve the upward swept stripes to be left for the top three non-commissioned officer ranks (2:104). Approval for the horizontal stripe for the lower three ranks came in December 1952, but was deferred until the existing stocks of the old stripes could be depleted (8:346). In 1954, General Nathan Twining became the next Chief of Staff, and when the issue of the new stripes was presented for his approval, he replied with a short memo stating, "No change to be

made in the insignia” (8:346). There was no further changes proposed to the stripes until the creation of Senior Master Sergeant (E-8) and Chief Master Sergeant (E-9) in June 1958.

The Military Pay Act of 1958 authorized the additional grades of E-8 and E-9, however, no promotions were allowed during Fiscal Year of 1958. The two new grades were particularly welcome because it was believed that they would relieve the “compression” in the grade of Master Sergeant. However, it did not develop quite as planned. To get the new positions of E-8 and E-9, they reduced the Master Sergeant rank force by that number. This kept the same ratio or compression as before (9:32). Still, the creation of the E-8 and E-9 open opportunities and responsibilities that were not available before this time. Again, finding the right stripe to signify this increase in responsibility and prestige was important.

It was determined that the titles and insignias should blend in with the existing stripes and rank system as much as possible. Therefore, it was proposed to build upon the existing stripe layout to create the new stripes for E-8 and E-9 rather than redesigning the entire stripe series. Some of the suggestions proposed and then discarded were: the use of superimposed Master Sergeant stripes, which made two stars (rejected because it looked like the general officer’s rank); and the use of a diamond symbol (rejected out of confusion with the First Sergeant insignia) (9:34). The choice was finally narrowed down to using the existing Master Sergeant stripe with the addition of one rock pointing up for Senior Master Sergeant and two rockers pointing up for Chief Master Sergeant. This left a field of blue between the old Master Sergeant stripe and the new stripe for Senior Master Sergeant (9:34). (See Figure 4) The approval of these stripes definitely set the upper two NCO ranks apart from the rest of the enlisted force, and would remain that way for the next 38 years. The next major changes to the stripes would not occur until 1967 with the creation of the position for the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.

The position of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force was created in January 1967 to ensure the enlisted members had a voice at the top levels of management. With the creation of the new position, a distinctive new insignia was investigated. Again, several proposals went before the Air Force Chief of Staff for consideration. One such proposal suggested placing a third rocker above the Chief's rocker, but was rejected as being "too much" when it was modeled for the Air Staff. Finally, on 3 March 1967, it was agreed that the insignia would keep the same field of stripes, but a wreath would surround the star on the interior field of blue to designate the rank of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (6:4). (See Figure 5). Another significant change to happen during that year was the changes to the airmen's grades.

In 1967, Airmen grades, titles and terms of address were revised to make the following changes: Airman Basic (no stripes), Airman (one stripe), Airman First Class (two stripes), Sergeant (three stripes), with Staff Sergeant through Chief Master Sergeant not changing (4:78). (See Figure 6) This revision again brought the rank of E-4 back into the non-commissioned officer status which brought the Air Force in line with the rest of the services. This change was because in smaller units, the E-4 were linked to the sergeant ranks and were filling more of a role of responsibility (5:4). It also did away with the disparaging terms associated with "second class and third class" airmen. In other words, the change modified the way we perceived ourselves and instilled more pride in the lower ranks. These changes would hold until 1975 when a study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a three tier enlisted force structure.

The three tier program for the enlisted force was adopted in December of 1975. It divided the enlisted force into three groups consisting of airman (E-1-E-4), NCO (E-4-E-6), and Senior NCO (E-7-E-9). The key aspect of the new program was the creation of the new position of Senior Airman (E-4) while maintaining the NCO (E-4) position. The next aspect of this change was the E-

1 through E-4 Airmen would no longer wear the silver star. They would have a blue one until they reached the rank of NCO (10:38). (See Figure 7) This change in the stripes finally set the distinguishing boundaries between each of the three tiers. With all the changes to the junior ranks, it was not long before someone decided the Senior NCO should have new stripes to set them apart.

In June of 1976, various proposals for the Senior NCO stripes were provided to the major commands for consideration. Of the proposed, three were given major consideration: (1) An additional over-stripe, (2) An optional shoulder board with embroidered grade for shirts with epaulets, and (3) Use of miniature grade insignia on the collar of the short sleeve shirt (11:66). However, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Thomas N. Barnes, disagreed with the proposed changes because he did not perceive any need for the changes. Consequently, General Jones, the Chief of Staff, placed all of the proposed changes on "hold" for further consideration (11:66). It took over five years before one of the proposed changes was adopted. In February 1982, Headquarters AFMPC released an Interim Message Change 82-1 to Air Force Regulation 35-10 that allowed the top three enlisted ranks to wear the shoulder board insignia (stripe). This change gave the top three the option between the shoulder board and the stripes on the sleeves (1:1). No further changes to the enlisted stripes were proposed until almost ten years later.

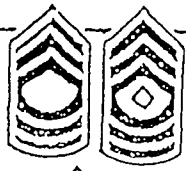

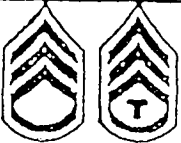
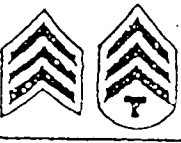
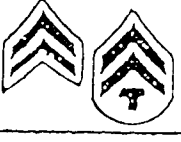

On 19 March 1991, General Merrill McPeak, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, announced the termination of the E-4 NCO (Sergeant) status, effective 2 May 1991 (14:2). According to a video tape made by General McPeak and distributed to all commands, the reason for the elimination of the E-4 sergeant was primarily because of the imbalance between the NCO and Airmen ranks due to the mandatory reduction in forces. This action once again made the Staff Sergeant the first-level NCO grade as it had been from 1952 until 1967. General McPeak made several other changes during 1991.

One of the major changes for 1991 was the introduction of the new proposed enlisted stripes. The first part of the proposal was to once again place a silver star in the middle of *all* enlisted stripes. The star had originally been removed in the late 1970s to give distinction between the Airmen (E-4) and NCO (E-4). Now, with the removal of E-4 sergeant and NCO status beginning with Staff Sergeants, the distinction was no longer needed (15:43-47). The proposal also recommended changes to the top three grade stripes. Specifically, one stripe would be taken from the bottom of the Master Sergeant's insignia, and moved to the top as a rocker. This brought the stripe in line with that of Senior and Chief; setting the three Senior NCO ranks apart from the rest of the enlisted force (15:48). Again, according to the video, the intent of this change was to provide more recognition of the special trust and responsibility placed upon the top three enlisted grades. In November 1991, the Uniform Board, with the approval of General McPeak approved the proposed new stripes (12:27). (See Figure 8) However, in talking with some of the Senior NCOs, I determined that most Senior NCOs were split on whether the changes were good or not. Some really liked the changes and others really hated them. By October of this year, 1997, the old style of stripes for Senior NCOs will have to be changed to the new style, ending another era of change for the enlisted stripes.

In the preceding information, I have taken the evolution of the stripe from its initial history with George Washington to the final changes in 1991. George Washington wanted to award his men for bravery, and issued an order for them to wear a strip of white to indicate their status. This became the first stripe worn by the enlisted force. Next, in 1947, the Air Force became an independent service, and needed to create a stripe that would reflect their role in the air. What was created is still the basic stripe used today. Although the enlisted rank structure has changes throughout the years, the only significant change to the stripes occurred in 1991 with in

implementation of the new stripes for the Senior NCO status. It is our responsibility as leaders and supervisors to know about how the stripe came into existence and to pass on the proud heritage of the stripe to our junior NCOs and Airmen. So, the next time you are promoted and you sew on your new stripe, stop a minute and reflect with pride on how much we as NCOs have accomplished and how the stripe signifies those achievements.

CHEVRON DESIGN AND GRADE TITLES
1947

FIRST GRADE		MASTER SERGEANT AND FIRST SERGEANT
SECOND GRADE		TECHNICAL SERGEANT
THIRD GRADE		STAFF SERGEANT AND TECHNICIAN THIRD GRADE
FOURTH GRADE		SERGEANT AND TECHNICIAN FOURTH GRADE
FIFTH GRADE		CORPORAL AND TECHNICIAN FIFTH GRADE
SIXTH GRADE		PRIVATE, FIRST CLASS
SEVENTH GRADE		PRIVATE

Chevrons (Insignia of Grade) for Army Enlisted Men.

FIGURE ONE

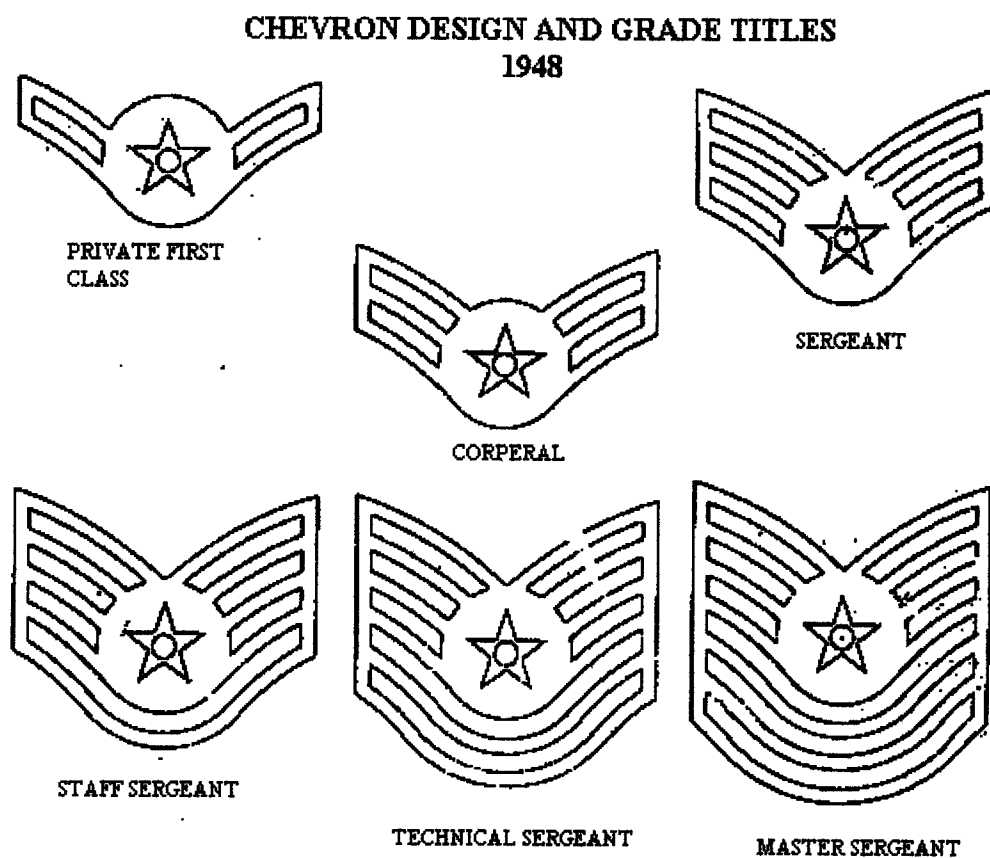
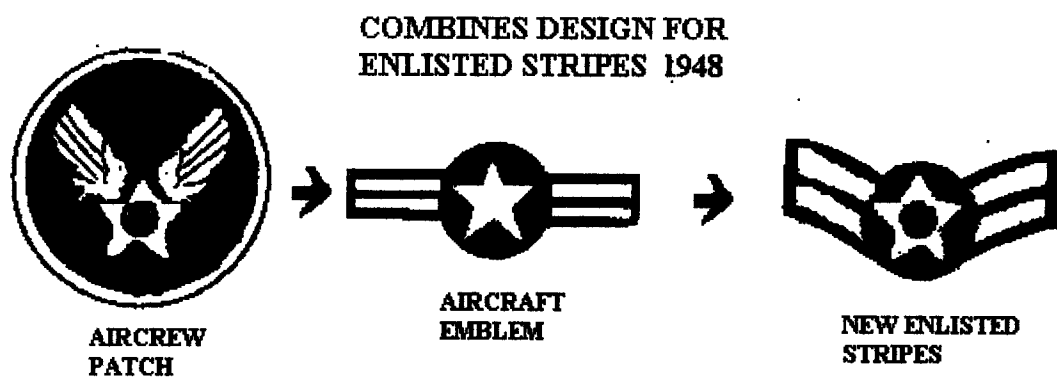


FIGURE TWO

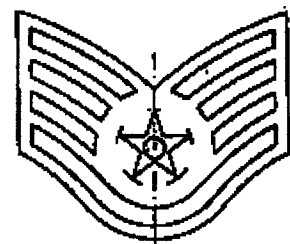
CHEVRON DESIGN AND GRADE TITLES
1952



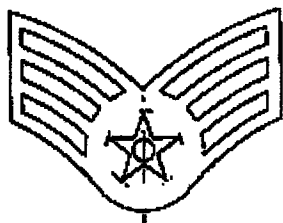
MASTER SERGEANT



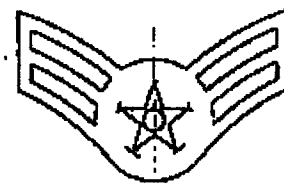
TECHNICAL SERGEANT



STAFF SERGEANT



AIRMAN FIRST CLASS



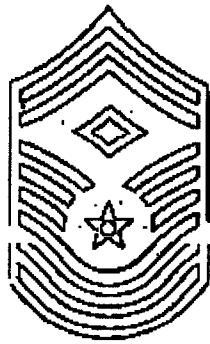
AIRMAN SECOND CLASS



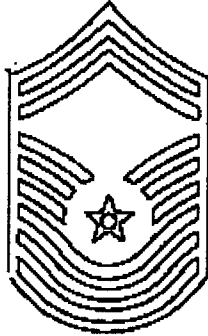
AIRMAN THIRD CLASS

FIGURE THREE

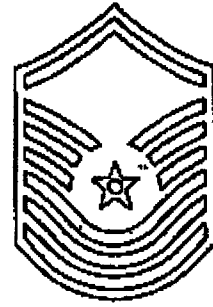
CHEVRON DESIGN AND GRADE TITLES
1958



FIRST SERGEANT'S DEVICE (DIAMOND)



CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT



SENIOR MASTER SERGEANT



MASTER SERGEANT



TECHNICAL SERGEANT



STAFF SERGEANT



AIRMAN FIRST CLASS



AIRMAN SECOND CLASS



AIRMAN THIRD CLASS

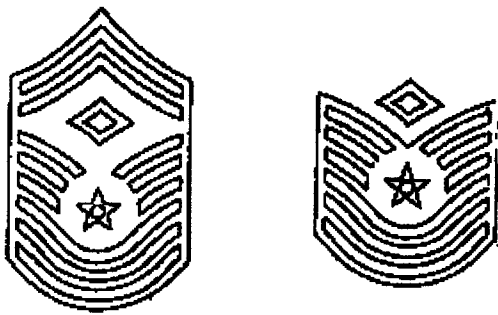
FIGURE FOUR

**CHEVRON DESIGN FOR CMSGT
OF THE AIR FORCE 1967**



FIGURE FIVE

CHEVRON DESIGN AND GRADE TITLES
1967



FIRST SERGEANT DEVICE
(DIAMOND)



CHIEF MASTER
SERGEANT



SENIOR MASTER
SERGEANT



MASTER SERGEANT



TECHNICAL SERGEANT



STAFF SERGEANT



SERGEANT



AIRMAN
FIRST CLASS



AIRMAN

FIGURE SIX

CHEVRON DESIGN AND GRADE TITLES
1975



FIRST SERGEANT DEVICE
(DIAMOND)



CHIEF MASTER
SERGEANT



SENIOR MASTER
SERGEANT



MASTER
SERGEANT



TECHNICAL SERGEANT



STAFF SERGEANT



SERGEANT



SENIOR AIRMAN



AIRMAN
FIRST CLASS



AIRMAN

FIGURE SEVEN

CHEVRON DESIGN AND GRADE TITLES
1991










		
AIRMAN	AIRMAN FIRST CLASS	SENIOR AIRMAN
		
STAFF SERGEANT	TECHNICAL SERGEANT	MASTER SERGEANT
		
SENIOR MASTER SERGEANT	CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT	CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE AIR FORCE

FIGURE EIGHT

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