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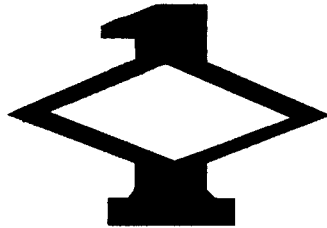
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**Major Milestones In The Evolution
Of The Air Force First Sergeant**

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Perhaps one of the most unique enlisted positions within the United States Air Force is that of the First Sergeant. No other individual has more impact on our most precious asset - our people. Early on in its history, the Air Force affirmed the importance of the first sergeant position in the following statement from AFR 39-16, "Selection, Training and Utilization of First Sergeants":

The management of people is one of the most important and highly complex functions of a commander. To perform this function properly, the commander must rely heavily upon the key noncommissioned officer within his organization - the first sergeant. (1:2-7)

Having served as a first sergeant for five years, the author agrees with the Air Force opinion as to the importance of this position. The overall management of the enlisted members in a unit is of paramount importance, and the stakes are truly high. How many of our people would have completed the downward spiral toward self-destructive behavior if a concerned first sergeant hadn't been there to make the "catch"? Every day, all over the Air Force, supervisors bring troubled subordinates to the "shirt" (common Air Force vernacular for first sergeant) because they know this is their best source of assistance.

Because it is such a unique and invaluable position, this writer feels it important to look at the evolution of the Air Force first sergeant. While it would be impossible to completely address every factor and variable contributing to the evolution, it is possible to look at some of the major milestones having an impact. To help you better understand how we arrived at the first sergeant you see today, I have selected what I consider the most significant events affecting the evolution. These events, taken from numerous articles, studies and papers, show that the first sergeant has been a concern to many of our former leaders, both officer and enlisted.

No look at an evolution would be complete without a starting point. Our look at the first sergeant should, therefore, begin at the beginning with the birth of the Air Force. When the Air

Force became a separate service, it opted not to have a rank of first sergeant and also decided that the individual filling the first sergeant position did not need to be the highest ranking NCO in the unit. (2:6) The squadron "top kicks" (Army vernacular for first sergeant) not only performed the same duties they had while in the Army Air Corps, they also looked at themselves the same way. In the article "Meet The First Sergeant", from the May 1954 issue of *Air Training* magazine, author Lt. George W. New, says of the first sergeant, "Although he called his men airmen, he still thought of them as soldiers." (3:9)

It was this same article that first highlighted the general dissatisfaction being felt by first sergeants. It forwarded a number of recommendations designed to improve the role of the first sergeants. Of all the recommendations, the one authorizing the diamond on the chevron was the most enthusiastically received. (3:13) On 22 September 1954, the new Chief of Staff, General Nathan F. Twining, approved a new distinctive insignia for first sergeants. It consisted of a traditional diamond sewn in the "V" above the grade chevron. (4:5)

Even though there was little change in the role of the first sergeant from the Army Air Corps to the Air Force, the responsibilities were reduced during a consolidation trend in the 1950s. More and more functions were consolidated into centralized or specialized offices on base. This continued until most of the remaining duties of the first sergeant were related to management of the reduced orderly room. (1:2-5) These conditions caused the effectiveness of the first sergeant as a manager of human resources to decline drastically, because the first sergeant had become more of a personnel clerk than a leader. (2:6)

The problem of a diminished role for first sergeants was further compounded with the creation of the E-8 and E-9 super grades in 1958. As more and more NCOs were promoted to the new

grades, the role of the first sergeant became clouded, and in some cases, was the basis of much conflict. The problem was stated in practical terms by then Chief of Staff, General Lew Allen. During an oral history interview he revealed, "in many instances where the first sergeant would restrict some airman to the barracks for a sloppy living area, he would immediately be overruled by the maintenance chief who would demand that the airman be put on duty, so his orders were always countermanded. It made the first sergeant feel ineffective." (5:116-117) This is where we find the first sergeant when the first major evolutionary event occurs.

Due to the ineffectiveness of first sergeants, the Air Force, in 1960, directed a study of the procedures for selection and utilization of first sergeants. As a result of this study, the first sergeant career field was created in 1961. (2:7) The new procedures resulting from the creation of the first sergeant career field were welcomed almost unanimously by the major air commands. After being in existence for almost 13 years, the Air Force was finally addressing the many issues being raised concerning first sergeants. The new procedures gave commanders more flexibility since they would now have a wider choice of airmen to use in the first sergeant manpower slots (previously they could use only people from the personnel specialty field). Also, first sergeants would now be allowed to advance to E-8 and E-9 due to the elimination of the Master Sergeant ceiling that had existed in the first sergeant specialty. Since NCOs were now free to laterally retrain into the career field, this was also seen as a way to keep adequate numbers of first sergeants. Unfortunately, this expected benefit did not materialize. The new procedures did not provide enough first sergeants and it did not significantly upgrade the effectiveness of the first sergeant position. (2:9) First sergeants were still performing mostly administrative duties and there still existed a diluted emphasis on the role and prestige of the first sergeant. (1:2-6) The

next decade would see the need for more changes.

By March 1966, there was a need for 25% more first sergeants, which at the time equated to approximately 500 vacancies. (2:9) To fill the void, the Air Force decided to allow Technical Sergeants to hold first sergeant positions and continued to encourage the major commands to recruit volunteers. By the fall of 1971, the first sergeant career field was 101% manned. (2:13)

By April 1971, the Air Force decided that the addition of Technical Sergeants was not effective and stopped allowing E-6s to enter the field. Technical Sergeants were phased out by April 1973. (2:13) Even though numbers again began to decline, the Air Force decided to rely on recruitment efforts within the commands to keep the numbers up. It was the impending shift to an all-volunteer force that brought about the next significant milestone in the first sergeant evolution.

In a letter to the Chief of Staff, General John D. Ryan, the CINCMAC, General Jack J. Catton, summarized a two-year study that had been ongoing in his command. In his letter he stated, "we developed a number of significant changes in our first sergeant program. These include grade determinants, selection procedures, and training requisites. Thus far, we have been able to meet our requirements from voluntary applications for retraining, and I believe that we are making progress in our objective to enhance the image and improve the function of the first sergeant's position." (6:1) The groundwork seems to have been laid for the decision to conduct another study. In his response on 9 Feb 72, General Ryan says, "I am most gratified you are pursuing an aggressive, dynamic program...we are on the right course." (6:2) In August 1972, the Air Force convened a Headquarters, USAF First Sergeant Workshop.

While the 1960 study had concentrated only on improving first sergeant manning, the purpose of the 1972 workshop was to determine how to improve both quantity and quality. The workshop was particularly concerned with the first sergeant manning shortages, quality and

training of first sergeants, and the inadequate method of selecting first sergeants. (2:13)

Proposals made by the workshop were incorporated in a new Air Force Regulation, AFR 39-16, "Selection, Training and Utilization of First Sergeants". In it, each of the concerns addressed by the workshop were addressed.

Career field manning would be satisfied by allocating quotas to each command based on its first sergeant requirements. Commands were to select individuals to fill these quotas. There was also a provision for involuntary cross training of NCOs to eliminate shortages when there were not enough volunteers. (2:14-15)

The quality of first sergeants was also addressed in the new regulation. Procedures were established to provide for the review of the qualifications of prospective first sergeants. This was meant to increase the chances that only highly qualified individuals would be selected. All applications were to be reviewed at the local level by base commanders and forwarded to the major command for final approval. (2:14) The new regulation also directed that first sergeants would remain first sergeants, even when transferring to another organization. We can see how this change would serve to increase the experience level (or quality) of individual first sergeants. The workshop did a good job of addressing the quantity and quality issues. However, resolving the training issue represented the most significant benefit to the effectiveness of first sergeants.

In 1972 the Air Force further improved the training and qualifications for first sergeants by developing a career development course for the field. To follow up on the career development course, Air Force officials announced that first sergeants would get special consideration for slots at the Senior NCO Academy. (2:19) These were significant enhancements to be sure, but the single most important change was the development of a formal training course. ATC assumed

responsibility for setting up a course in FY 1973. The course comprised three separate blocks of instruction: administration, human relations, and management. The first class convened at Keesler on 17 October 1973. (7:18) The establishment of the First Sergeant Academy ultimately became the last major milestone in the evolution of the Air Force first sergeant. Many problems had been overcome to arrive at the basic framework existing today. In the ensuing years, only minor adjustments would be necessary to ensure the Air Force would continue to have a motivated, qualified, and trained corps of first sergeants.

Our modern first sergeants are generally highly qualified senior NCOs who volunteer to serve in a unique and demanding career field. By virtue of their experience and training, they are more than able to effectively deal with the myriad of issues confronting them on a daily basis.

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THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST SERGEANT

The First Sergeant has always held a highly visible, distinctive, and sometimes notorious position in the military unit. While there is little written history and many obscure gaps, we are able to follow some of the evolution of the First Sergeant.

The 17th century Prussian Army appears to have been the starting point for what was later called the First Sergeant in the American Army. The Prussian Army Feldwebel, or Company Sergeant, by today's practice seems to have combined the duties of not only the First Sergeant, but of the Sergeant Major as well. Standing at the top of the noncommissioned hierarchy of rank, they were the "Overseers" of the company's enlisted personnel. To this end, they kept the Hauptman, or Company Commander, informed of everything that went on in the company; whether NCOs were performing their duties in a satisfactory manner, that training was properly accomplished, and finally, that at the end of a busy day, all soldiers were accounted for in their quarters. They were the only noncommissioned officers allowed to strike a soldier; an especially disorderly soldier could be given three or four blows, with the Feldwebel's cane. They were forbidden to flog a soldier, and the Feldwebel who overstepped his authority in this manner would themselves be pilloried. Moreover, they were to see that none of the NCOs beat their soldiers.

In setting up the American Army, General Washington relied heavily on the talents of General Baron Von Steuben. During this time, Von Steuben wrote what is referred to as the "Blue Book of Regulations". This "Blue Book" covered most of the

organizational, administrative, and disciplinary details necessary to operate the Continental Army.

While Von Steuben outlined the duties of such NCOs as the Sergeant Major, Quartermaster Sergeant and other key NCO's, it was to the Company First Sergeant, the American Equivalent of the Prussian Feldwebel, that he directed most of his attention. This noncommissioned officer, chosen by the officers of the company, was the linchpin of the company and the discipline of the unit. The conduct of the troops, their exactness in obeying orders and the regularity of their manners, would "in large measure, depend upon the First Sergeant's vigilance." The First Sergeant therefore must be "intimately acquainted with the character of every soldier in the company and should take great pains to impress upon their minds the indispensable necessity of the strictest obedience as the foundation of order and regularity." Their tasks of maintaining the duty roster in an equitable manner, taking "the daily orders in a book and showing them to their officers, making the morning report to the captain of the state of the company in the form prescribed, and at the same time, acquainting them with anything material that may have happened in the company since the preceding report," all closely resembled the duties of the 17th century company sergeant.

The First Sergeant also kept a company descriptive book under the captain's supervision. These descriptive books listed the names, ages, heights, places of birth, and prior occupations of all enlisted in the company. The Army maintained the books until about the first decade of the 20th century when they were finally replaced by the "Morning Report".

Since the First Sergeant was responsible for the entire company, he was, in Von Steuben's words, "not to go on duty, unless with the whole company, but is to be in camp quarters to answer any call that may be made". On the march or on the battlefield, they were "Never to lead a platoon or section, but always to be a file closer in the formation of the company, their duty being in the company like the adjutant's in the regiment".

For any First Sergeant who has received a telephone call at 0230 from the Security Police or marched at the rear of the Squadron Mass, there may be reason to believe that little has changed since Von Steuben. To a large extent that is true, but there have been some changes over the years.

It wasn't until the early 1830's period that any significant changes came about. NCOs were already distinguished by various colored epaulettes and other distinctive trappings, but now the First Sergeant was distinguished from fellow NCO's by a red sash around his waist.

Another development of that period was formal recognition, in the form of increased pay for the Company First Sergeant. A new pay scale enacted by Congress in 1833 established the rates as follows: Sergeant Major, Quartermaster Sergeant, and Chief Musician - \$16.00 per month; First Sergeant of a Company - \$15.00 per month; all other Sergeants - \$12.00 per month; corporal - \$8.00 per month; musicians and private soldiers - \$6.00 per month. Compare that to the First Sergeant's pay in 1944 of \$185.00 per month and today's pay of just under 2,000.00 dollars.

The regulations for the uniform of the Army of the United States in 1847, authorized the wear of chevrons on the fatigue jacket for noncommissioned officers. It also authorized the lozenge (or French diamond) to designate the First Sergeant. Indications are that this was the first appearance of the diamonds as insignia devices.

As the years went by, little changed in the life of First Sergeants. Perhaps the most significant and enduring aspect of the position is recognition of the importance of the First Sergeant. The following is a quote from an article by Colonel Charles A. Romeyn, printed in *The Calvary Journal*, July 1925:

"After many years effort, we at last got our First Sergeants a big increase in pay. Yet, I believe we have not gone far enough. They are the most important enlisted person in the Army, give them the most pay and I almost feel like making all Second Lieutenants salute them. The ones I have worked with in the past and many others, I would gladly give the first salute. The First Sergeant is the Captain's Chief of Staff. A poor one will ruin a good troop no matter what kind of Captain they have. And many a poor Captain has had his reputation saved and his troop kept, or made good, by a fine First Sergeant. Am I right?"

In 1947, when the Air Force became a separate service, the First Sergeant faced some changes too. The Air Force First Sergeant became a position rather than a rank and position. The AFSCs for First Sergeant began as 731X0s with ranks of E-6 or higher. In the late sixties, the AFSC changed to 10070 and 10090 and at the same time allowed new First Sergeants from any career field. April 1971 saw the deletion of Technical Sergeants

(E-6) as First Sergeants except those who had be selected for E-7. Recently our AFSC changed to 8F000.

Yes, many years have passed from the caning of disorderly soldiers by the Feldwebel, to the inspector and records keeper of Fredrick Von Steuben's "Blue Book", to the sash wearing, sword toting soldiers of the 1830s, all the way to todays First Sergeant who exercises general supervision over assigned enlisted personnel. Yet, one theme remains clear. The First Sergeant is now, and always has been, in the business of helping people.