

AFEHRI File 100.039

Research Materials/Source Documents  
STUDENT PAPERS

FILE TITLE: Background Paper on the Evolution of the Air Force First Sergeant

AUTHOR: MSgt K. A. Courshon, 18 Feb 1992

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G.R. Akin date 27 DEC 97

EPC Representative J. J. Clark date 6 Jan 98

Scanner Operator Scott Kellum date 31 Jan 98

APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin  
GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF  
Director  
Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

Feb 92

BACKGROUND PAPER  
ON  
THE EVOLUTION OF THE AIR FORCE  
FIRST SERGEANT

1. This background paper describes the evolution of the Air Force first sergeant. To accomplish this, the paper is divided into three periods: 1947 to 1960; 1961 to 1972; and 1973 to present day. Within each of these periods, the areas of duties, rank, training, and problems associated with the Air Force first sergeant will be discussed. It is only proper to begin with the birth of a new service.

2. On 18 September 1947, the National Security Act established the United States Air Force. Along with this act, President Truman defined the mission and role of the new service in an executive order. (2:47) As the role and mission of the Air Force itself was defined, the first sergeant's role was not well defined. This was highlighted in an Air Force Times column nearly twenty years after the Air Force became a separate service. Bruce Callander noted in his column:

Much of what "everybody knows" about the first sergeant is myth. Their titles, ranks, and jobs have been the subject of much top-level discussion....But officials concede the first sergeant's position is still not as well defined as it might be. Historically, the first sergeant never made a very comfortable transition from Army to Air Force organization.... (7:18)

This is a chief concern during these early days of the newest service.

3. The question as to the role of the first sergeant was further addressed by Strategic Air Command (SAC) top NCOs attending SAC NCO academies in 1954. One of the major points discussed by these 240 master sergeants, about half of which were first sergeants, was: "The first sergeant should be in a command position rather than an administrative one." They further stated "that his place in the line of command should be immediately under the commander, rather than the squadron adjutant, and subordinate only to the commander." (3:1395) The administrative nature of the first sergeant's position may have been partly caused by the Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) for their position.

4. The first sergeant's AFSC was 73170 during the early days. This AFSC was in the personnel career field. On the surface, this would seem appropriate as the duties of the first sergeant revolved around personnel assigned to the unit. The real problem of this career field started to come into light after the "supergrades", senior master sergeant and chief master sergeant came into being in 1957. After the creation of the "supergrades", first sergeants were considered for promotion to senior master sergeant. This was a plus. The drawback was requiring first sergeants to compete for promotion with personnel technicians, AFSC 73270. The position that both the first sergeant and personnel technician were competing for was personnel superintendent, AFSC 73290. A note is in order. First sergeants come from any AFSC, while the personnel technician was

schooled in the personnel field. Based upon "...the broader experience of the technician has often given him an edge in the competition for SMSgt." (21:5) The "supergrades" caused another problem for master sergeants who were first sergeants.

5. First sergeants were not necessarily the senior NCO in a unit. The SAC NCOs initially addressed the problem of first sergeants not being the senior NCO in a unit. They recommended first sergeant's "...should carry brevet rank above all other NCOs in his squadron." (3:1395) This recommendation came nearly two years prior to the "supergrades". Prior to the "supergrades", there were situations that required staff sergeants or technical sergeants to be first sergeants. (11:25) This would be problem that would plague first sergeant through present day. It was further addressed in 1960, when the Air Force realized a change was needed. An 1960 Air Force Times article stated:

Chief reason for the push to make a change now has been the growing difficulty of using MSGts in the first sergeant job where other airmen can rank them by one or more grades but are technically under the top kick's supervision. The addition of the SMSgt and CMSgt grades has forced AF to find some solution to the problem and Headquarters would like it settled before too many more airmen are raised to these grades. (9:4)

And some changes were to happen in 1961.

6. During the early days of the Air Force, the first sergeant received no formal training. This would not change until 1967, when SAC would take the first step. (17:5)

7. Also during these early days, the rank of the first sergeant ranged from staff sergeant to senior master sergeant. The staff sergeant positions were filled by WAFs in WAF units. It was not until the changes of 1961 would this range of ranks be limited.

(18:10)

8. During the first eight years that the Air Force was a separate service, the first sergeant position was not identified by any special insignia. It was not until 1955, after design by the Army, that the first sergeant's diamond came into being. The diamond was not designed to be part of the rank, like the Army first sergeant device. But rather it was designed to be worn a quarter inch above the stripes of the first sergeant. (11:25)

9. During the early days of the Air Force, the first sergeant saw a distinctive insignia, promotion potential to senior master sergeant, being treated like a clerk not a leader, being outranked by the "supergrades", being a member of the personnel career field, and received no formal training. Some of this would start to change in 1961.

10. 31 March 1961 saw the birth of a new career field within the Air Force. This new career field came with a nine skill level and maximum grade of chief master sergeant. The new AFSC was 01090, First Sergeant. This new AFSC allowed for ranks of master sergeant and above for males and technical sergeant and above for WAFs. Personnel performing first sergeant duties in AFSC 73170 were converted to the new specialty without requirement to

complete the supervisory exam, which was required to maintain a nine skill level. (6:1) The new specialty meant that first sergeants would compete for promotion within their specialty only. (6:43)

11. Also, the new specialty emphasized the role of the first sergeant as an assistant to the commander. The primary duties of the new specialty included: "Assisting the squadron commander.... Conducting squadron training and information programs.... Supervising squadron activities and facilities.... (and) Directing squadron personnel administration." (6:43) These were similar to the duties performed by the previous AFSC.

12. The new specialty did not really help the first sergeant all that much. It did limit the competition for stripes to competing against only first sergeants. Also, the career field was moved from personnel. As noted early, however, the role was still not clear. The reason for this maybe the way the first sergeant of the Air Force was transitioned from the Army. Bruce Callander noted in an 1965 Air Force Times article:

When the Air Force was established, airman (sic) jobs were based on a skill-grade philosophy, and organization leaned more toward shops and offices than field combat units. The first sergeant was dropped as a rank, and Air Force put him in the personnel field.... (7:18)

This transition continued to haunt the first sergeant into the mid and late 1960s.

13. In a study by Brig General McCarthy, he stated how first sergeants were being used and the result:

By the late 1960s, the first sergeants spent much of their time performing administrative duties formerly handled by orderly room clerks. At that time there existed no formal school for the career field. Manning shortages forced the opening of the field to technical sergeants and some staff sergeants, pointing forcefully to a diluted emphasis on the role and prestige of the first sergeant. (20:2-6)

Basically, the way the Air Force transitioned the position of the first sergeant from the Army led to a lesser role and prestige for this time honored military position. This may have led to the Air Force having a shortage of nearly 400 first sergeants in 1966. The shortage opened the career field once again to technical sergeants. (8:1) This may have lead one to believe that the position was not as important has once thought. An article in the TIG Brief in 1966, however, noted the need for more first sergeants, and that the first sergeant's "...most valuable contribution...is as leader of the unit's airmen and NCOs." (1:5) Bruce Callander's Air Force Times article in 1965 hit the problem on the head in the title: "The First Shirt's Place: Still Not in Sharp Focus." (7:1)

14. In response to the problems facing the first sergeants, the Air Force decided not change its philosophy on specialty versus rank for first sergeants. The reason given for not making the Air Force first sergeant a rank as well as a specialty like the Army and Marine Corps was "...men in different grades can be used as first shirts in different size units and jobs with varying responsibility." (15:2) Many of the types of problems facing the first sergeant during the early days of the Air Force

continued. However, some other help was in the wind.

15. This middle period of the evolution of the Air Force first sergeant also saw a second change of what ranks could be first sergeants. Effective 1 April 1971, the minimum rank to be a first sergeant was master sergeant. (18:10) This period of Air Force history, however, would see the beginning of training for the first sergeant.

16. 1 May 1967 marked the beginning of formal training for first sergeants. At March AFB, CA, SAC's Fifteenth Air Force established "...what it believes is the first First Sergeant School in the Air Force." The training would cover advanced management, personnel counseling, communication skills, and military justice. This was a two class trial. (17:5) More training was soon to come from the headquarter's level.

17. The first attempt at an Air Force wide standard method of training first sergeants came in February 1972, when Extension Course Institute (ECI) published a Career Development Course (CDC). It was primarily concerned with the management and supervisory role of the first sergeant. (19:4) The course was mandatory personnel retraining into the career field and could be taken as a voluntary course by others. The course number was 10090. (16:8) A formal resident course, however, was needed.

18. 1 and 2 August 1972 were busy days for former CMSAF Kisling. During this period, CMSAF Kisling and six officers from the personnel community conducted the First Sergeant Workshop at the



Pentagon. During this workshop, one of the topics discussed was training for first sergeants. The workshop recommended the establishment of formal training program. The recommended sources of this training included an Air Training Command (ATC) course and an Air University (AU) program. It was further recommended that 400 seats a year be set aside at the newly created Senior NCO Academy for first sergeants. The thought behind the attendance at the academy was it would provide selectees "... with top level management training through a prestigious course." (19:4) A year following this workshop, an ATC course was developed.

19. During this middle period of Air Force history, the first sergeant saw a stabilization of rank, the ability to be promoted to the "supergrades", the beginnings of formalized training, and continued problems with their role. 1973 would see the beginning of the current period of the first sergeants evolution.

20. The current period of the evolution of the Air Force first sergeant saw some standardization and formal resident training.

In late 1973, a new Air Force Regulation standardized the selection procedures; established a two year stabilized tour; provided for administrative support; priority for on-base housing; and established a four week training course for first sergeants. (22:2)

21. Also in late 1973, Keesler AFB, MS., became home to the Air Force First Sergeant Course, later to be renamed the Air Force

First Sergeant's Academy (Feb 82). The new course director, CMSgt James Blevins, stated that the course "...is designed to prepare selected senior noncommissioned officers to perform effectively in the first sergeant career field." (13:8) The first year of instruction would saw 440 students learning communication skills, unit administration, supply and facility management, drill, military justice, and human relations. The course is four weeks in length.

22. Training for today's first sergeant is conducted at two different locations, with three different courses. The active duty and Air National Guard (ANG) courses are still taught at Keesler AFB, MS. The active duty course is four weeks long and meets the requirements of the initial course, with updated lessons. The ANG course is two weeks in length and is a condensed version of the active duty course. It does highlight topics of special interest to the guard. The other course is taught at Robins AFB, GA., by the Air Force Reserve (USAFR). This course is similar in nature to that taught by the ANG. Until early 1991, the ANG and USAFR courses were combined and taught at the academy. (10:-) But training has not solved the problems faced during the early days of the Air Force.

23. In 1976, problems facing the early Air Force first sergeants were once again addressed. An Eighth Air Force study stated:

In recent years, the average first sergeant has been relegated to being the Chief Clerk in the Orderly Room, the enlisted dormitory manager, and, to a great extent, he has been forced to assume much of the NCO supervisor's

leadership role.... NCO supervisors have become more concerned with the technical aspects of their jobs and have become less concerned with the morale, welfare, and discipline of their subordinates.... (12:3)

This type of problem continues to plague our first sergeants of today. I am aware of first sergeants that spend a majority of their time working administrative tasks, instead of "people problems/programs". This can lead to the first sergeant having a great understanding of the unit administration, while having little understanding of the problems associated with the unit enlisted force. (10:-)

24. The problem of being out ranked within the unit is still a problem. Currently, Air Force Regulation 39-1, Airman Classification, summarize the duties of the first sergeant as: "Advises and assists the commander in managing unit activities; and exercises general supervision over assigned enlisted personnel." (4:A5-3) This is complicated with Air Force Regulation 39-6M, The Enlisted Force Structure. AFR 39-6M states: "Within the enlisted ranks, NCOs take rank and precedence over all airman and other NCOs according to grade...." (5:4) As one regulation tasks first sergeants with "...general supervision over assigned enlisted personnel..." the other reminds us to the rank and precedence of NCOs in relationship to each other. I have heard stories where chief master sergeants have the commander's ear, while first sergeants (master sergeants) are not considered on important decisions. It is true that commanders must support and utilize their first sergeants as

they see fit, however, some feel that senior master sergeant and chief master sergeant first sergeants tend to be in better positions just based upon their rank. (10:-)

25. Other problems currently facing first sergeants include: possible involuntary separations of unit members due to a reduction in force (RIF); and deletion of first sergeants from units, such as from the Basic Military Training Sqd (BMTS) at Lackland AFB, TX. It is hoped that the manpower experts do not see the first sergeant as a position that units can do without. As for how the RIF will be handled, only time will tell.

26. Today, there 2,442 diamond wearing first sergeants. 1,739 of these first sergeants can be found on active duty, while USAFR contains 293 and the ANG has 410 first sergeants. (14:29,50)

27. This current period of Air Force history has given the first sergeant regulatory guidance, formalized training, continued role problems, and new problems with management and leadership of a shrinking force.

28. This background paper has shown the evolution of the Air Force first sergeant from 1947 to present, looking at their problems, training, ranks, and duties. The early period was marked with receiving the diamond, being promotable to senior master sergeant, and problems with their role. The middle period, 1961 to 1972, saw the birth of the first sergeant career field, being promotable to chief master sergeant, the beginning

of formal training, and continued role problems. The current period has seen the establishment of the First Sergeant Academy, regulatory guidelines, continued role problems, and new complex issues for the first sergeant.

29. In conclusion, the Air Force first sergeant has seen changes during the short history of the service. These changes have been positive in some aspects, such as limiting the position to the senior NCO ranks, and formal training for newly selected first sergeants. The problems with how first sergeants are utilized by their commanders still needs work. Commanders need clerks to do administrative work, and they need first sergeants to handle the people business. Military history has shown the first sergeant as a leader, however, the Air Force has not. With the RIF taking place, the Air Force should rely on first sergeants as the leaders they are.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. "The Air Force Needs More First Sergeants." TIG Brief (18 March 1966), p. 5.
2. Air Force Pamphlet 50-34, Vol 1, Promotion Fitness Examination. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1 April 1990.
3. "AF First Sergeant Should Be Leader And Not Clerk, SAC NonComs Declare." Army Navy Air Force Journal (17 July 1954), p. 1395.
4. Air Force Regulation 39-1. Airman Classification. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 15 March 1991.
5. Air Force Regulation 39-6M. The Enlisted Force Structure. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 7 March 1986.
6. Callander, Bruce. "1st Sergeants Get Own Field." Air Force Times (19 November 1960), pp. 1, 43.
7. -----. "The First Shirt's Place: Still Not in Sharp Focus." Air Force Times (17 February 1965), p. 18.
8. -----. "First Shirt Jobs Open To Techs." Air Force Times (7 December 1966), pp. 1, 16.
9. "Changes in First Sergeant Status Not Expected for Several Months." Air Force Times (8 October 1960), p. 4.
10. Courshon, Keith A., MSgt, USAFR, First Sergeant. Travis AFB, CA. 1990 - Present.
11. "Delay Halts Topkicks' 'Diamonds'." Air Force Times (21 May 1955), p. 25.
12. Directorate of Human Resources. The Role of the First Sergeant. Barksdale AFB, LA.: 8 AF/Personnel, January 1976.
13. Dwyer, Tom, TSgt, USAF. "New Wrinkles For First Sergeants." Airman (July 1974), pp. 7-10.
14. "The Enlisted Almanac." Sergeants (January/February 1992), pp. 11-69.

15. "First Shirt Approach: No Change." Air Force Times (18 October 1967), p. 2.
16. "First Shirt Course Now Offered by ECI." Air Force Times (25 October 1972), p. 8.
17. "First Shirt School Set Up by 15th AF." Air Force Times (22 Mar 1967), p. 5.
18. "First Shirt Skill Calls for E-7, Up." Air Force Times (24 March 1971), p. 10.
19. Headquarters United States Air Force. First Sergeant Workshop. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, August 1972.
20. McCarthy, James R., Brig General, USAF. The Role of the USAF First Sergeant. Blytheville AFB, AK.: Headquarters, 42nd Air Division, March 1977.
21. "New 'Firsts' Have to Pass Tests Before Promotion to Supergrade." Air Force Times (10 December 1960), p. 5.
22. "1st Shirt Field Updated." Air Force Times (3 October 1973), p. 2.