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FILE TITLE: Background Paper on the First Sergeant Career Field

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Feb 17-8-1  
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BACKGROUND PAPER  
ON  
THE FIRST SERGEANT CAREER FIELD

The first sergeant job began in the western frontier days when the need arose in the United States Army for someone to enforce discipline and supervise the activities of the enlisted force. This duty went to the senior enlisted member of a cavalry troop or infantry company. (9:1) From then through World War II, the Army's "top kick" was the commander's right hand and was generally picked as the best noncom ramrod in the outfit. He held the same skills as the other people in his outfit, such as military police or artillery, and held the rank of First Sergeant. His duties were basically the overall supervision of the unit's enlisted force. (7:--) Benjamin Blas-singille, a first sergeant during World War II, listed his duties as training soldiers, running physical conditioning programs, orienting the troops, taking charge of day-to-day operation of the company, and recommending punishments to the company commander. His philosophy for that position was very basic: "You let them know what the rewards or the punishment are, and you stick to it, and you will have their respect." (4:36,37)

When the Air Force became a separate service in 1947, the long and difficult transition to today's first sergeant position began. Jobs were based on career field groupings and there was uncertainty as to where the first sergeant's role fit in, so in 1949 the reporting code of 99910 was established within the Special Activities Career Field. This field covered several jobs that were necessary in the performance of the Air Force mission, but weren't functionally related to any other career field. Air Force Letter No. 35-499 described these as "jobs that are the beginning elements of

SMSgt Probasco/Seminar E/4268/jjp/14 Oct 92

developing and expanding Air Force activities which may eventually become career fields." These miscellaneous jobs included Laundry Supervisor, Railroad Equipment Supervisor, and, of course, First Sergeant. The job description established for the first sergeant covered almost every conceivable leadership position. The job summary was simple: "Supervises activities of squadron pertaining to personnel, maintenance of discipline, promotion of welfare and morale, and coordination of squadron functions." (1:1,2,26)

The specific duties and tasks listed were much more daunting. The very first statement was simple but broad: "Manages squadron activities." This was expanded to include planning, scheduling, and coordinating work, leave, and passes of all airmen assigned to the squadron - quite a task for one person. Additional tasks were enforcing discipline, counseling, making arrangements for procurement of recreational supplies and facilities, and supervising care and upkeep of the squadron area. Further, the first sergeant was required to plan and conduct courses such as simulated or actual firing exercises, parades and inspections, and classes or lectures in military courtesy, dress, discipline, and customs of the service. While on maneuvers, the first sergeant also had to locate the camp site, then supervise the erection of tents and the construction of disposal pits and air raid shelters. (1:26)

The knowledge and skill requirements for this jack-of-all-trades were laid out as well. The first sergeant needed "little dexterity or coordination of movement," but did require "considerable concentration and expenditure of nervous energy in directing squadron activities." (1:27)

By 1959, there was no longer a separate rank of first sergeant and the Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) 73170 had been established for the position.

This placed first sergeants in the personnel field, since their duties were primarily directed toward personnel. However, the next step in the career ladder was AFSC 73290, personnel superintendent. Since the first sergeant's duties were of a much broader nature, the personnel specialist, AFSC 73270, had better experience and job knowledge required for the superintendent position and often edged out the first sergeants in the race for stripes. (11:--; 13:--)

Another problem appeared the same year with the establishment of the E-8 and E-9 grades. Since the only authorized grades for first sergeants were E-7 for men and E-6 or E-7 for women, there were now people assigned to squadrons in which they outranked the first sergeant but were technically under his or her supervision. These concerns about promotions and rank conflict led to complaints from the field, and were large factors in Headquarters Air Force proposing a change to the system in 1960. (10:--)

The proposal was to delete the first sergeant AFSC and allow commanders to pick their first sergeants from any career field. The "first shirt" would assume the still-valid manning document position, but compete for promotion in his or her own specialty. This would not only remove the promotion problems, but help the individual additionally by showing broader leadership experience to the promotion boards. Another benefit to the change was that commanders would have a wider choice of airmen to use in the job. Also, the change would open up the job to the top three ranks, easing the problem with the first sergeant technically supervising some NCOs that actually outranked him or her. (10:--; 11:--)

Officials expected little objection to the plan when they sent it to the field for review, but the response was surprisingly prompt and spirited. The

job of the first sergeant was considered an institution, and almost no one could bear to see it disappear as a specialty. The result was the establishment of a brand-new AFSC specifically created for the first sergeant, 01090, effective 31 March 1961. The grade restrictions were also lifted at this time, allowing male Master Sergeants and above to hold the position as well as female Technical Sergeants and above. (5:--; 11:--; 12:--)

One benefit of this system was that now first sergeants would only be competing against other first sergeants for promotions, and it didn't matter what other career field they came from. The better they were at the first sergeant job, the more likely they'd be promoted. Another benefit was that the first sergeant could now be the ranking NCO in the unit again. (5:--)

During this period, all NCOs were required to achieve a passing score on the USAF Supervisory Exam (USAFSE) to hold the 9 skill level. This requirement was waived when the new system was implemented, since there was only one skill level for the field and the first sergeants were all master sergeants in 7 skill level positions. However, they still had to pass the USAFSE to become eligible for promotion. (20:--)

All this helped to firmly establish the first sergeant career field, but another problem soon arose. First sergeants were getting reassigned in their old career fields. The situation was that all first sergeants were cross-trainees; there was no way to train that job beginning with new airmen. Therefore, all TSgt and MSgt first sergeants held 7 level control AFSCs (CAFSCs) in their previous field. Policy set all TSgts and MSgts at the 7 level CAFSC and there was no 7 level in the 01090 field. So in October 1961, a new policy was set for all first sergeants to get their CAFSC at the 9 level regardless of rank, and they could now remain in their field upon reassignment. (21:--)

Things went fairly smoothly for the first shirts for a while. Growing unrest finally hit a peak in 1966 when Headquarters USAF got concerned about the shrinking populace in the career field. Headquarters sent a request to the major commands to recruit hard for new first sergeants because there were 400 empty MSgt slots. Once again, the promotion problem had showed up. In a fairly small career field, E-8 and E-9 openings were hard to come by, and several of them were taken up by SMSgts and CMSgts cross-training directly into the available positions. In 1965 there had been no promotions to E-8 and only 7 to E-9 out of 270 eligible. People who had decent chances in another career field were understandably reluctant to enter the stiff competition in the first sergeant area. (6:--)

The fix came in January 1967--TSgts were allowed into the field to get the manning back up to standards. The 01070 AFSC was established for TSgts and MSgts, leaving the 01090 for SMSgts and CMSgts. With the new 7 level slot for the MSgts, they could now hold the job without passing the USAFSE, though they would still need it to acquire the 9 level and get promoted. (6:--)

In 1971, first sergeants got the first major overhaul of their career field in 10 years, with a raise in the grade, education, and aptitude requirements. The AFSC was now 10090--the 7 level, along with TSgts, was dropped from the field. Once again the incumbent MSgts were waived from the requirement to pass the USAFSE to acquire the 9 level. Prerequisites for the job now included, for the first time, possession of a high school diploma, completion of a base-level management course, and a score of 70 or higher on either the administrative or general aptitude tests. Previous requirements remained in effect, such as the ability to speak clearly, a high standard of personal conduct, and management knowledge and experience. (16:--)

In 1972, the Air Force started looking a little harder at the first sergeant field to see if they could make it a little more enticing for volunteers. The first incentive was priority consideration for slots at the brand-new Senior NCO Academy at Gunter AFB, Alabama. Air Training Command was also tasked to develop a curriculum for a resident course exclusively for first sergeants. Another plus was a one-year deferment from assignments to Southeast Asia, starting the date a new first sergeant entered training, with a possible extension of this deferment to 18 or 24 months. In addition, officials started looking at a special incentive allowance to offset the first sergeants' added expenses, such as higher gasoline bills. Headquarters also recommended that local commanders think about designating their first sergeants as key personnel to move them up on the priority lists for base housing. (19:--)

In October 1972, the Extension Course Institute established the first formal training program for the first sergeant career field. ECI Course 10090, a one-volume career development course, became mandatory for award of the AFSC and was also made available to all members of the military services. Covering management and general supervision aspects, the course emphasized personnel administration, training, administrative operations, unit discipline and morale, and the first sergeant's responsibilities to the commander. (14:--)

In April 1973, Air Force Manual 39-1 was updated with new requirements for award of the 10090 AFSC. A first sergeant now had to have a clean record (no court martial or serious civilian convictions) and present a "high standard of military appearance." Some other qualifications that were desirable but not mandatory included completion of high school courses in social science, sociology, psychology, and English. (8:--)

In October 1973, a new regulation arrived on the scene with sweeping changes to the first sergeant field. Air Force Regulation 39-16, The First Sergeant, established for the first time what officials called "professional guidance, utilization, and standards" for the career field. Specifically, the regulation set up standardized procedures for selection of first sergeants, guaranteed a two-year stabilized tour, specified administrative support for first sergeants, classified them as "mission-essential" and gave them priority for on-base housing, and established the first four-week training course for the field. The regulation also established restrictions against the assignment of conflicting additional duties and provided that the career field be fully manned at all times. (3:2-5; 15:--)

On 17 October 1973, the First Sergeant Training School opened at Keesler Air Force Base, Mississippi, with 12 students. The objective of the course was to improve the quality of enlisted personnel Air Force-wide. Three separate blocks of instruction were provided in administration, human relations, and management. This course evolved into the First Sergeant's Academy and became a requirement for the award of the fully qualified 10090 AFSC. (2:A5-4; 17:18)

The first sergeant finally achieved the same status and support as other career fields in January 1976, when the Director of Personnel at Headquarters USAF established a first sergeant functional manager position. For the first time, central management was provided for this career field that functioned as the vital link between the unit commander and enlisted personnel since the very inception of the United States Air Force. (18:1)

As we've seen, the first sergeant has had a very dynamic role. Though the rank structure, AFSCs, training, and qualifications for the job have



changed frequently over the last 45 years, the job itself has remained the same. The "shirt" still enforces discipline, promotes morale, and assists the unit commander in supervision of the enlisted force. (2:A5-3) From the Army ramrod on the western frontier to today's professional and caring supporter of enlisted personnel's interests, the first sergeant has always been, and remains, the epitome of top-quality leadership for the United States Air Force.

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