

The USAF-A Corporation or a Military Service?

by

CMSGT (Ret) Stephen Funk

Many years ago, as a First Sergeant, I wrote an article for the Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, newspaper, The Command Post, about the perceived loss of prestige and authority felt by the Air Force's senior noncommissioned officer corps. I concluded in that article that I believed this loss was real, not merely perceived. Unfortunately, after much thought and a few informal surveys of my compatriot senior noncommissioned officers, I also concluded that we, the Air Force senior noncommissioned officer corps, had done it to ourselves. I also believe strongly that we did not do it solely by ourselves: Air Force leadership, from the highest levels to base level officers and enlisted personnel, also played an extremely important part. After mulling over that concept for a while, I extended the scope of my ruminations further. I realized that not just senior noncommissioned officers are being slighted: The Air Force itself is being systematically and purposefully demilitarized. I think I've uncovered a major reason why today's Air Force is seen by those inside and outside it as lacking in military bearing, customs and courtesies, and traditions. Unfortunately, I've come to the exact same root cause: We, as an institution, have done it to ourselves.

Allow me to explain: As radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh is fond of saying, "Words have meanings." Expanding on his statement, not only do they have meanings in a specific dictionary sense, they have multiple and intertwined levels of meanings that include impressions, mental images, and emotional reactions by those who heard or read them. The words we use in the course of our daily duties not only impart their technical meaning, they also impart images of the Air Force to other military members and the population at large. It is this fact that helps me prove conclusively that we, in our desire to be politically correct and in a misguided and purposeful attempt to demilitarize the Air Force, have done it to ourselves.

Examples abound! Many single, lower-ranking, enlisted personnel once were quartered in a "barracks." Now, because we have demilitarized the terminology, they are now living in a "dormitory." Ask any young persons in your local high school or college what they think of when they hear the word "dormitory." Almost to a person, they will respond with words to the effect of "college-style living arrangements." Thoughts of a messy room. "Party time!" Fraternity antics. Is that really the impression we want our young personnel to have: that they are residing in a college-type atmosphere? Or, do we want them to remember, at all times, that they are members of the Air Force, volunteers in the profession of arms (if, in fact, the Air Force is yet a profession of arms)? If you ask those same people what they think of when they hear the word "barracks," a totally different picture will appear. They may use terms which are disparaging, knowing only the barracks they have seen in the media, in old movies, or what their fathers or grandfathers talked about living in when they were in the "big one." While I completely support the initiatives to upgrade our single enlisted personnel housing and I'm certainly not advocating a return to the open-bay barracks of old, I think our terminology must change. Yes, I am saying that even a barracks can have private entrances, two-room suites, and semi-private baths. What you call it does not change what it is. What I'm saying is that by continuing to downplay this

military terminology, we are in fact downplaying (Possibly on purpose?) the military. profession of arms aspects of the Air Force itself. Calling the facility a "barracks" would help remind all personnel and the general public that the Air Force is a branch of the military, not just an employment opportunity for young people provided by the government.

Here's another example: When anyone, whether in the military community or in the civilian world, hears the term "mess hall" or "chow hall," they know immediately and without question that the speaker is describing a military place to eat. But, let the speaker alter the terminology to the "dining facility," and, not only is the military connotation itself lost, the impression that it is not a military facility at all is greatly enhanced. We must always remember that this impression is also shared by those who use the facility! When young people hear repeatedly that the place they eat is a "dining facility," any military connotation is lost. More than lost, really - the military connection is purposely downplayed. College campuses have dining facilities. The profession of arms should eat in a mess hall or a chow hall. Yes, this can be a very well designed, well lit, well staffed facility with outstanding food. It can win the Hennessey Award repeatedly. But, it should still be called a mess hall or a chow hall. To do any less is to deliberately deny our heritage and our profession.

When I came into the Air Force, "billeting" was where we went for temporary quarters. Now, it's "lodging." What's wrong with keeping the traditional military title? Again, by putting people in "lodging," we've purposely downplayed any military connection. Temporary lodging can be obtained from Ramada Inns, Holiday Inns, Motel 6s, etc.. By changing our billeting function into just a lodging facility, the same military traditions, rules, expectations, and customs and courtesies as are displayed at Ramada, Holiday, etc., are implied. Is this any way to continue to keep military mindsets and traditions alive? No, unless we intend to demilitarize the Air Force. We should return to "billeting" for temporary quarters!

Even the sacred and much-maligned "motor pool" has been lost! This time-honored moniker is long-gone. Now we have "transportation" and "vehicle dispatch." Both terms have no implied military connection, and serve to further denigrate any connection with our past and our task.

At one time, the sign at the main entrance to the medical center at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, read "Scott Health Services." No mention of the Medical Group. No connection to the base upon which it sits. Thankfully, the sign now reads "375 Medical Group." A small victory, but an important one!

Not only does this destruction of our military heritage by demilitarizing the language send a signal to the world at large that the Air Force is not a military service, it inculcates the personnel who live and work in the facilities described with the ideology that they aren't working in a military facility. Have you noticed dress and appearance standards dropping? Have you heard first names being used? Have you noticed many fewer orders and a lot more suggestions? How can we expect any less when we are sending, on purpose, a signal that we wish to downplay the military aspects of our service?

I could go on, but I think I've made my point. Maybe I'm an old brown-shoe lifer (two more terms we don't hear any more), but I truly believe that having personnel report in to billeting, be

issued a room in the barracks, have chow in the mess hall, and get a ride from the motor pool would go a long way to returning the military bearing and customs and courtesies to our Air Force: A daily, consistent, and constant reminder that our real task is to be strong enough to deter any aggressor, and, if that fails, to break things and kill people in the most efficient manner possible. Today, by having a fresh, young troop go to lodging to check in, get a room in the dormitory, supper at the dining facility, and a taxi ride from vehicle dispatch tells them one thing: forget basic military training, forget technical school military training reinforcement....this is the "real" Air Force, and we're not in the military. "Don't call me 'sir,' I work for a living."

For my final "language" point, think back through some of the recent discussions you have had with other members of the Air Force. Did words pass between you such as "corporate knowledge"? Did anyone mutter "businesslike"? How about "The boss said..."? Have you heard anyone talk about looking for a new "job"? Does the term "careerism" ("What's in it for me?") sound familiar? Did you use the military rank and last name, or were you Joe and Mary? Are you an OIC/NCOIC, or are you the "manager" or "superintendent" or, worst of all, the "chief" of a section (unless you are a Chief)? Do you wear the normal duty uniform, or the uniform of the day (There is a difference!)? On the other hand, did anyone suggest an open-ranks inspection? How about a Reveille or Retreat Ceremony? Did you correct anyone's uniform problem? Language and personal responsibility do make a difference!

More comments on the demilitarization of the Air Force: Today, unfortunately, rules are made to be suggestions. Duty hours are flexible "should-be" ideas. Military personnel working flex-time! The Weight Management Program (WMP), the Dress and Personal Appearance Instruction, and other similar dinosaurs, are merely given lip-service. Customs and courtesies are ancient history. To know this as a fact is to simply look around. There should be no surprise – the truth is painfully obvious. Where in the entire Air Force inventory of rules, regulations, instructions, and checklists does the option of a military member "calling in sick" exist? In the Air Force I enlisted in, personnel had three choices when the start of the duty day came round: Be on duty (present for duty, on leave or pass, or TDY), be hospitalized, or be dead. No other option existed. "Flex-time" was indeed flexible – whenever the NCOIC or OIC wanted you there, and you had to be flexible enough to be there. Where does it say that officers or flight crews/aeromedical technicians are exempt from the WMP? Where does it allow members in uniform to walk from their vehicle into the office/restaurant/gas station/house without a hat? How about Battle Dress Uniforms and flight suits at a sit-down, waiter/waitress-serviced facility downtown for lunch? What are the officially-sanctioned hours of the day (or days of the week) when, as neighbors who call each other by their first names, are they not in the Air Force as a colonel and a senior master sergeant? (This one is driven much more by the senior member than the junior.) Do you believe the evidence of your own eyes and ears that "leadership or decisions by committee" rather than "leadership by the leader" has taken over? To me, all of these things are obviously wrong. But in today's Air Force, they seem to be the norm and result in no corrective action. No corrective action implies acceptable behavior.

Finally, the Oath of Enlistment I took about seven times has a line in it that reads, "I will obey the orders of the President and the orders of the officers appointed over me." Unfortunately, it seems as though even that sacred statement has been changed. My experience and, I'm sure, yours, points to the Oath now stating, "I will obey...over me after I am allowed to ask why and

be given the answer I deserve, for I have a right to ask, and, if the answer is not to my liking, to disobey until an acceptable reason for me to obey is provided."

This is wrong, and should stop now. My personal protest will be to continue to use the politically incorrect terms until I'm gone. I will continue to press professionalism until I can no longer do so. I retired in October, 1998, but I will continue to protest this seemingly purposeful and wanton demilitarization of the Air Force. To do otherwise would be a great disservice to those who came before us, who made the ultimate sacrifice, who were maimed for life, who established the Air Force as a separate but equal military service.

The Air Force – a corporation or a military service? I am afraid I know the answer, and it is not a good one for the American people. We must reverse this trend. We must reestablish the idea that we are in the United States Air Force and that we do not work for the United States Air Force! Join me in this battle! (Or is that also too militaristic of a term for today's kinder and gentler Air Force?)

Contributor

CMSGT (Ret) Stephen R. Fulk was a First Sergeant for the last 15 years of his 28-year career, assigned to Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. He held the position in multiple units, including Civil Engineering, Airlift Communications Division, the Communications Group, Security Police, and was the first First Sergeant for Headquarters, Air Mobility Command. He was the Senior Enlisted Advisor and First Sergeant for the Commander, Airlift Forces, Southwest Asia, for 186 days and retired on 1 Oct 98. He is currently a full-time student at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, Illinois, majoring in Sociology with a minor in Business Administration.

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