

A Brief History of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Chevron



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Preface

This monograph is designed to give some insight into the history of the distinctive chevron worn by the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. The research for this monograph was conducted by the staff of the Air Force Enlisted heritage Research Institute located at Maxwell Air Force Base Gunter Annex, Montgomery Alabama.

For more information on the Office of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force or other topics on our enlisted heritage and history visit our website. <http://afehri.maxwell.af.mil>

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In the late 1960s, Congressman L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, initiated hearings about changing the enlisted promotion system. During this time frame, the Air Force was looking into the issue of increased responsibility for its new chief master sergeants. Commanders started using chiefs as their senior enlisted advisor, and it eventually became an Air Force-wide policy in the 1970s. These senior enlisted advisors worked closely with the commanders and counseled/advised them on all matters relating to the enlisted force.¹

Congressman Rivers believed all of the services should have a top senior enlisted person, so he introduced a bill that would mandate the appointment of a senior non-commissioned officer by each branch of service. This action prompted the Air Force to create the Office of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (CMSAF). In April 1967, General John P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, selected Chief Master Sergeant Paul W. Airey to serve as the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.²

Prior to the creation of the Office of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, the Chief of Staff made a request to DCS/Personnel to develop some means for providing distinctive recognition for the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. The matter was turned over to the Air Force Uniform Board and submitted as Action Item 30-9. The panel addressed the matter of providing a distinctive insignia for the CMSAF. At first, it appeared that he would wear an aide's aiguillette on the uniform with regular chief master sergeant chevrons. But, General McConnell disapproved, writing a memo, "I don't consider an aiguillette to be appropriate. He is not an aide, but rather a representative of all Air Force Airmen to the office of the Chief of Staff, USAF."³

The uniform board submitted several prototypes for consideration:

1. A cap insignia with wreath around it instead of a plain circle.
2. A wreath around the "U.S." lapel insignia instead of the plain circle.
3. Reverse colors of the Chief Master Sergeant rank insignia, i.e., blue on a silver background instead of the silver on blue.
4. Chief Master Sergeant rank insignia with added stripe, i.e. 9 stripes, 3 up and 6 down.

In addition there were two insignia designs sent forth for the blue service cap:

1. One cap with a 1 ½ inch silver band placed under the chin strap and around the cap.
2. One cap with a lighter blue 1 ½ inch band placed under the chin strap and around the cap.

All items were developed and sent to the board for consideration.⁴

After several proposed designs were considered for the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force uniform insignia, (then) CMSgt Don Harlow had the pleasure of modeling one of the chevrons before General McConnell and the members of his staff. One insignia on the sleeve of the blouse simply added another stripe to the existing insignia worn by all Chief Master Sergeants. This placed three stripes at the top of the rank insignia and six below, this was seen as “too much” and was rejected by the CSAF.⁵ The blouse CMSgt Harlow was modeling conformed to regular stripes, however, the center star was surrounded by a wreath. After discussion among the general officers as to the two proposed insignia, CMSgt Harlow was asked by the Chief of Staff which insignia he would select, never realizing that some day he would have the opportunity to wear such. He selected the insignia on the basis of its simplicity, décor, and one benefiting the individual to hold such a prestigious position.⁶



Proposed Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force chevron 1967



Proposed Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force chevron 1967



Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force chevron 1967-1991

The unique U.S. collar insignia and hat insignia worn by the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force was originally designed by MSgt Curtis W. Diggs in 1963. The original design MSgt Diggs sent to the Air Force was rejected many times as his original proposal was set to change the rank insignias from E-1 through E-9. His purpose of the design was to enhance and distinguish the enlisted image (with emphasis for Top 3 NCO’s and later the CMSAF).⁷ Although the design was rejected as a change to the NCO insignias, one of the designs was later adopted for the office of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.



CMSAF Paul Airey was the first to wear the newly designed hat insignia, U.S. collar insignia, and chevron with the wreath around the star.





Symbolism of Eagle and Wreath

MSgt Diggs stated in his proposal that symbolism of the American eagle is recognized around the world and symbolizes that we are ever ready to insure the rights of freedom when called upon. He used the wreath from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to circle the eagle as a lasting tribute to those who gave all.⁸

The original wreath design was created from the wreath on a pair of Command Gunner's Wings as was the plain band from the eagle of our enlisted hat insignia. The items were copied and blown up to match size so the wreath could be laid over the cap insignia. The item was then copied as a single unit, submitted as design number 5, and later approved for wear by the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force.⁹

General T.J. Dacey Jr., SAC Deputy Chief of Staff, notified MSgt Diggs in May of 1967 that his insignia design was not approved for wear by all NCO's.¹⁰ However, it was adopted for wear by the CMSAF in April 1967. MSgt Diggs continued with his proposed insignia changes through 1977, although they would never be accepted as Air Force insignias.

MSgt Diggs submitted two other proposals to change the design for the CMSAF insignia, both required the removal of the stripe and replaced the stripe with a metal insignia to be worn on the shoulder or collar same as an officer's insignia. The first design called for the same wreath worn on the current CMSAF hat with three stars above it, the actual size measured 1 1/8 inches in diameter. The second proposal in 1973 was to replace the stripe with a metal insignia in the shape of a diamond surrounding a "1", wreath and four stars. His proposal also called for the title change to Chief Superintendent of the Air Force (CSAF).¹¹ The proposals were never approved and the CMSAF chevron remained unchanged until 1991.



It was time for a change and the chevron was made larger and brighter. In addition the senior NCO chevrons were re-designed removing a stripe from the lower portion and placing it on top of the chevron.



In October 1991, CSAF General Merrill McPeak and CMSAF Gary Pfingston revealed new proposed enlisted insignias along with the proposed new uniforms. The proposal returned the star back to all enlisted ranks, eliminated Buck Sergeant and modified the top three enlisted stripes. One stripe was taken off the bottom and put at the top starting with Master Sergeant and continuing for Senior and Chief to include the CMSAF chevron.



AF Chief of Staff General McPeak, CMSAF Pfingston, and Capt. McGinn unveil the new AF uniform, October 1991. C/O AFSA

In an interview CMSAF Gary Pfingston said “Some people don’t like [the senior NCO stripe], I do...I liked the old ones, too. That’s what I first put on. However, I still think the new ones visibly distinguish our top three senior NCOs, and I think that’s a good thing.”¹² The stripes were soon accepted by all and proved to be a much needed change to our old chevrons. The new chevrons were made mandatory 1 Oct 1997.

The new enlisted chevron changes also meant a change for the CMSAF design as shown in the photograph above. The brighter chevron was easily identified at a distance and remained in effect until November 2004 when the latest design was unveiled by CMSAF Gerald Murray.

Senior Air Force leaders, former CMSAFs and Airmen across the service encouraged a re-design of the CMSAF insignia to have it stand out among other CMSgts. In October 2002, CMSAF Gerald Murray and CSAF General John Jumper began the process to select a new chevron that would be an even stronger representation of our enlisted force. During a meeting in March 2003, between General Jumper, CMSAF Murray and the former Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force, CMSAF Gaylor stated it was time to change the insignia worn by the CMSAF. After the debate and discussion, all former CMSAFs agreed.¹³

Former CMSAF Eric Benken was also a strong supporter for the change. During his tenure, he created the Command Chief Master Sergeant (CCM) position out of the former Senior Enlisted Advisers and gave them a star in the top field of their insignia.

The new chevron design, with the additional star located in the field of blue was drawn up by CMSgt Marc Mazza, Air Force Material Command Senior Enlisted Adviser, accompanied by a talking paper which provided rationale for the new title and chevron. The new title and stripe was presented by General Mike Ryan, Chief of Staff, to the MAJCOM Commanders during executive session at Corona and unanimously accepted. The CCM title and new insignia became effective 1 Nov 1998.¹⁴



The Command Chief Master Sergeant chevron was a great addition to the enlisted force however, the large star in the center of the chevron soon overshadowed the chevron worn by the CMSAF. When the CMSAF was among the other service's enlisted service leaders it was difficult to determine who our Air Force senior enlisted leader was. The Command Chief Master Sergeant chevron design had indeed overpowered the CMSAF design and gave more justification for a change to the CMSAF chevron.

Several designs were proposed, such as the insignia to the right. This design was simple and moved the wreath and star from the lower portion of the chevron to the field of blue with the standard star among the stripes of the lower portion of the chevron. Several design reviews were made however, they didn't fully capture the intent of the position as the Air Force's top enlisted leader.



The goal of the redesigned CMSAF insignia was to have a distinct chevron that clearly identified the Air Force's top enlisted leader, yet still maintain its rich heritage.

One of the proposed designs left the wreath and star in the lower portion of the chevron and added our nation's American Eagle to the field of blue. This design was similar to that of our sister service's top enlisted leaders, thus allowing greater recognition through joint services.

The design was accepted with the addition of two stars on either side of the American Eagle. The current version incorporates the symbol of our nation, the American Eagle, worn by all other military branch's senior enlisted leaders and maintains the traditional Air Force chevrons, star and wreath.



Although there was no heralded meaning prescribed to the force, CMSAF Murray often referred to the three stars as representation of our Air Force total force--Air National Guard, Air Force Reserve and active duty Airmen and our three core values, Integrity First, Service Before Self and Excellence in All We Do.¹⁵



*Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force chevron
1 November 2004 - Present*

ENDNOTES

1. AF Pamphlet 36-2241, USAF, Promotion Fitness Examination (PFE) Volume 1, Jul 1, 2003, p. 116.
2. See Note Above.
3. *The Chiefs*, Air Force Association (AFA) Enlisted Council, Arlington, VA., 1984, p. 7.
4. Minutes, Uniform Board, Thirtieth Meeting of the Permanent Air Force Uniform Board, agenda item 30-9, *Distinctive Recognition for the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force*, Feb 24, 1967, on file at AFEHRI, Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex, AL.
5. *The Chiefs*, Air Force Association (AFA) Enlisted Council, Arlington, VA., 1984, p. 7.
6. Letter, CMSAF (ret) Don Harlow, Deputy Executive Director Air Force Sergeants Association to Mr. Daniel Potochniak, (April 26, 1979), on file at AFEHRI, Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex, AL.
7. Letter, MSgt (Ret) Curtis Diggs to CMSgt Wayne Fisk, Director Enlisted Heritage Hall, (March 24, 1989), on file at AFEHRI, Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex, AL.
8. Newsletter, Andersen NCO Academy Graduates Association Chapter 29, Andersen AFB Guam, Vol. 1, New Enlisted proposal, (977), on file at AFEHRI, Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex, AL.
9. See Note Above.
10. See Note Above.
11. See Note Above.
12. *Generations Of Chevrons, An Enlisted History Through the Experiences of the Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force*, (Washington D.C.), 2004; p. 165, Janet R Bednarek, Air Force History and Museums Program, United States Air Force.
13. News release, Air Force News Service, New CMSAF insignia debuts Nov. 1, TSgt. David A. Jablonski, Air Force Print News, (29 Oct 2004), on file at AFEHRI, Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex, AL.
14. Email letter, CMSAF #12 (ret) Eric Benken, to CMSgt Malcolm McVicar, Director, Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute, RE: History check, (29 Sep 2005), on file at AFEHRI, Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex, AL.
15. Email letter, office of the CMSAF to CMSgt Malcolm McVicar, Director Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute, RE: Chevron Project, (3 Nov 2005), on file at AFEHRI, Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex, AL.



Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

The Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute supports the College of Enlisted Professional Military Education, conducting enlisted heritage research, performing heritage seminars, tours, ceremonies, and provides student support to all enlisted Professional Military Education schools and academies worldwide. The Enlisted Heritage Hall is designated as a heritage center is an element within the Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute. The Enlisted Heritage Hall is the heritage center which captures, preserves, and showcases to the world our enlisted history, heritage, and their resulting contributions to air power. The Enlisted Heritage Hall's primary purpose is the collection and preservation of the heritage of enlisted men and women involved in military aviation, now called the United States Air Force. The Enlisted Heritage Hall also provides a public service to the local and regional communities through its accessibility to the general public and its educational outreach programs.



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