The History of the Air Force Chief Master Sergeant



The reason for the lag between 1997 and 1999 from the original CMSgt Stripes to the new CMSgt stripes is because it was optional to wear either the original or new stripes from 1997 to 1999. Then in 1999 the new stripes were required to be worn the CMSgt.

To those on active duty today, the rank of Chief Master Sergeant is viewed as something that has always been there. Not so for members of the BROWN SHOE AIR FORCE.

The first promotions to CMSgt were effected 1 December 1959 when 620 men were elevated to that rank. The 40 years that has passed by since has dimmed our memories of the events and reasons for those first promotions. Many of the Chiefs on active duty today were not even born when these promotions took place.

The rank of Chief Master Sergeant and Senior Master Sergeant were created by Congress as a part of the Career Compensation Act of 1958 and are a direct by product of the explosion in TECHNOLOGY that took place during and immediately following World war II. These ranks did not exist prior to 1958 when MSgt (E-7) was the highest enlisted rank.

To understand why these super grades were needed, one must understand the legacy of World War II. America was committed to bringing that horrible war to an early conclusion and threw its mighty industrial and research capabilities into that task. Our scientists and engineers worked tirelessly to invent, develop, and perfect the weapons and support equipment necessary to bring the war to an early conclusion. They created new technology and sophisticated weapons beyond belief. As these new weapons, such as the atomic bomb, jet aircraft, missiles, electronics, radar systems, etc., came on board, the services found a need for enlisted men with advanced technical and military qualifications who were capable of assuming broad responsibilities and authority, just below the commissioned level.

Since there was no enlisted grade above Master Sergeant (E-7), the services found themselves with a situation they referred to as Grade suppression. This term is not in the dictionary. It is one of those famous military word coined to describe an existing situation, a situation where a Master Sergeant supervised one or more other Master Sergeant

By 1954, NCO Academies began to appear on the scene to provide the advanced management and leadership training for Master Sergeants in positions calling for the advanced training and qualifications. Master Sergeants with the higher capabilities gravitated to these positions, most of which were later changed on the manning documents to E-8 and E-9.

Congress created the super grades as a part of the Career Compensation Act of 1958 to relieve the grade suppression by enabling the services to promote above E-7. The basis law provided that each service could promote 2% of its enlisted force to E-8 and 1% to E-9.

The basic law required that an E-7 must have a minimum of 8 years enlisted service to be promoted to E-8 and an E-8 must have 10 years enlisted service to be promoted to E-9. The Air Force opted to require a minimum of 10 years service to be promoted to E-8 and 11 years for E-9.

The percentage that could be promoted to these new super grades was applied to the total enlisted strength. Each slot calling for the higher grade came from an existing E-7 manning document slot. They were not "in addition to" and the initial promotions did not create vacancies for lower ranks.

The percentage that could be promoted to these new super grades was applied to the total enlisted strength; however, it was obvious that some career fields did not need as many of the super grades as others. The Air Force performed an extensive study to determine where the super grades could be most effectively utilized, categorizing all career fields as Highly Technical, Technical, or Non Technical.

Since the need for the new super grades was greatest in the Highly Technical career fields, a higher percentage of slots were allocated to these areas. For example, an Aircraft Maintenance Supervisor was classified as being in a Highly Technical career field. As a result, more of the super grade slots were given to the Aircraft Maintenance career field.

The first Air Force promotions to Senior Master Sergeant were effected 1 September 1958 and another group was selected and advanced on 1 March 1960. Quotas, for the first time in Air Force history, were allocated by specific AFSC and selection boards were held at command level. Prior to this, promotion boards were normally held at base level and all airmen recommended for promotion to a specific grade were lumped together. The boards looked at cooks and bakers and candle stick makers together and lined them up in promotion order. These lists were subjected to an AFSC Cleansing when promotion quotas and frozen list came down from higher headquarters. When the frozen list was applied, the 8th man on the list might become the 1st man and promoted, the first 7 having been frozen out. Rather primitive when compared to systems in use today but they didn't have the sophisticated equipment of today to work with.

The Air Force promotions to Chief Master Sergeant were effected 1 December 1959. Command boards selected about 1700 for advancement from those promoted to E-8 in September 1958 and March 1959, however, only about 620 actually assumed the higher rank on 1 December 1959. The promotion of the remainder was withheld until 1 June 1960 due to budgetary reasons. There were no line numbers at that time and all advanced as a group.

As with the promotions to E-8, all promotion quotas were by AFSC and selection and advancement could be in either the primary or secondary AFSC.

Prior to these promotions to E-8 and E-9, the Air Force has started to phase out their Warrant Officer Program, the last warrants having been appointed about 1955. Many of the new Chief Master Sergeant assumed duties formerly performed by Warrant Officers. Many old timers still believe that the Chief and Senior grades were authorized to replace the Warrant Program but such is not the case. The Air Force has already eliminated the Flying Sergeants and Flight Officers and was not eliminating the Warrant Officers. The army and Navy retained their Warrant Programs and continue to use them with great effectiveness today.

The pay rates in effect at that time made these new Chiefs the highest paid enlisted men in history. Top base pay for a Chief with the maximum longevity was \$440.00 plus \$30.00 for rations and \$120.00 for quarters. Imaging, almost \$600.00 a month. Today, and Airman Basic enters the service with base pay higher than the combined pay of the most senior Chief Master Sergeant in 1959.

The **1 December 1959 Chief Master Sergeant** became one of the most elite rank groups in the Air Force similar to the ratio for General Officers.

Those promoted to Chief Master Sergeant in the first increment can be justly proud of their achievement. They are our Charter Chiefs or Founding Fathers. To the knowledge of this author, all served with honor and distinction leaving a legacy worth of emulation.

Their pride, however, should not be such to overshadow the fact that others equally or nearly equally qualified could not advanced with the first group and had to wait a year or two for their promotions. Our place in history and windows of opportunity, things over which we have on control, shape and govern much of what happens in our lives. The Charter Chiefs were simply at the right place at the right time. Every man or woman promoted to Chief Master Sergeant has every right and should feel just as proud of their accomplishment as the Charter Chiefs.

The selection boards were faced with the arduous task of selecting those men they felt possessed the leadership and technical abilities to serve in the new super grades. Due to small quotas, many superbly qualified MSgts and SMSgts could not be advanced with the first group.