



# THE LIFE SUPPORT NEWSLETTER



*News for the men and women who served in the USAF or civilians who work in Government or industry in the Aircrew Life Support business.*

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## Happy Birthday Life Support



### CHILI SEZ

On Monday, June 16th, over 120 people attended the celebration of the 50th anniversary of life support at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, NV. Through historical records, **Chief Tommy Tompkins** determined that the first class to attend the Protective Equipment (later changed to Life Support) course at Chanute AFB, IL was in 1953 and as such, proclaimed the year 2003 to be the 50th year of existence of the career field. The celebration focused on several firsts in life support such as the people who started the career field, the first female class at Chanute, and the first female CMS in life support. The celebration included two other first; all the MAJCOM Chief Master Sergeants were there, and so were some of the vendors with some of their products on display. Opening remarks were by **Col Albert Burnett**, Systems Program Director of the Human Systems Program Office at Brooks AFB, TX.

**Chief Rooney** opened things up by reducing everyone to the rank of Airman☺. Chief Tommy Tompkins followed with comments about the career field's beginnings and singled out some of the attendees for their accomplishments and contributions over the years.

By the way, speeches by both Chief Rooney and Tompkins can be read in their entirety by visiting our web site and clicking on reunion.

**Col (ret) Don Muir** told us what it was like back in the 1970s when women first got into the flight line business. Then **Nancy Smith** took the stage. As a lot of you know, Nancy was one of the first women in the career field and was also an instructor at Chanute. What a special honor it was to hear her talk about what it was like being one of the first females in life support and some of the words of wisdom she passed on to her female students back in the 1970s. After Nancy spoke, all of the past and present female life supporters in attendance were asked to join her on stage. We all saluted them and every female life supporter serving and have served in the career field.

The reunion and 50th celebration also included a sight seeing tour of the local area, a picnic and golf tournament at Nellis AFB, and a tour of the Thunderbird Life Support Shop.

Banquet night turned out to be very special as we conducted a "Passing of the Torch Ceremony". The affair started out with the Nellis AFB Honor Guard marching in through a corridor of Nellis AFB active duty life support troops dressed in their class A's. The honor guards presented the colors followed by the reading of the names of each person in attendance that was in life support in the 1950s or earlier. Those pioneer life supporters passed through the corridor and formed a line in front of the crowd. The oldest life supporter present, 81 years young **CMS (ret) Jim Karas** was called up and he passed through the corridor and joined the waiting crowd on stage. The Chief was then given a lit candle as he waited until the youngest life supporter present; 21-year-old **A1C Trevor Gilliland** from Nellis AFB joined him on stage with an unlit candle. As Chief Karas lit A1C Gilliland's candle with his candle, **MSgt (ret) Tim Howard** read the following modified version of "Your Life Is Our Business" signifying the passing of the torch:

*For the past 50 years our jobs we have done day in and day out.  
So the crewmember can fly without a concern or doubt.*

*Our work always comes first; perfection is a must  
You can count on that; our quality you can trust.*

*No job is too small; no task is too large. Our daily performance has the crewmember's  
life as its charge.*

*Life Saving Equipment must work every time  
Anything else will be looked on as a crime.*

*So let them fly safe, fight smart, and make our enemies pay  
For "YOUR LIFE IS OUR BUSINESS", is our motto everyday.  
Eventually the time must come for us to depart  
Replacements we train for that time when they start.*

*Aircrew members will be in good hands; there is no reason to fear.  
Safety is our only concern, their life we hold dear.*

*We have dedicated our careers to the aircrew,  
their welfare and comfort were all that we knew.*

*As we pass this torch to another generation,  
we ask that you continue to give them the best equipment and training without  
hesitation.*

After the ceremony the crowd was treated to a video presentation that I put together titled "50 Years of Life Support". The video featured AF footage of the past 50 years, and photos that some of you sent in. All enjoyed it. I watched the crowd as the video played and I will never forget how overcome some of them appeared. The video runs about 30 minutes long and cannot be added to our web page. It is on CD and is playable on your computer. If interested you can purchase a copy at cost (\$2) by contacting me.

Next year's reunion will be in Mesquite, NV located 85 miles north of Las Vegas and will be during the month of September. Complete details will be in the May 2004 newsletter.

This year of celebration is not over yet. You might want one of our 50th Anniversary Life Support Coins. The coin has been well received by all and is available for purchase. See page 8 for more information on how to place an order. Thanks to donations from **Survival Inc, Gentex Corp, Wel-Fab, Scott Inc, Conax, Chief Bill Wood, and Col George Braue** we were able to issue a free coin to all the reunion attendees. Below are some comments on the coin.

*"This is a wonderful coin with career field, history, and the 50th anniversary.  
Recommend we award to life supporters at some time in their training. Could be  
graduation from tech school, award of 5 level, etc., I'd say grad from tech school. They  
could be from retirees. Donations would pay for them easily".  
Gary Winchester*

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*"I have an idea I would like to bounce off of you, you might want to ask others of their  
thoughts, but I would be willing to purchase five more and donate them to the Widows  
of our friends that have gone on before us, i.e. CMS Shields, Perry, Ziegler, there are  
more, but I think you get my idea. Also, to those that have been our friends in the past  
and also new friends. They would be given as you thought best."  
Dave Wilson*

*"Wow, what a nice looking coin. I like the idea of handing them out to the grads at Tech school. Sign me up for two coins please."*

*Nancy Smith*

*"I like the idea of it being awarded to graduates even though they have not experienced our career field yet. It gives them something to be proud of and work towards being a professional."*

*John Patti*

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*"You certainly did a wonderful job in designing this beautiful coin. It not only displays the various levels of rank that were involved in this great career field, but it promoted the proper recognition that is due to the wonderful and dedicated personnel serving our aircrews. I thank you very kindly for including us former life support officers in this recognition and look forward to proudly displaying this magnificently designed coin in my office."*

*Cal Crochet*

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*"I would recommend we limit the free 50th anniversary coins to tech school graduates to this "Anniversary Year" (Let's say Jun 03 - Jun 04), after that they can purchase the regular coins. I will be happy to contribute to this year's cache of coins."*

*Bill Lott*

As you see there are suggestions to award the coin to the tech school graduates and to the widow or a surviving member of a deceased life supporter. If anybody wants to contribute towards either of these worthwhile suggestions just send in \$5 for every coin you want to donate. If I get enough donations in time we might be able to award coins to the last graduating class of the year.

#### **UPDATE ON RANDOLPH AFB TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN LIFE SUPPORT**

**Mark McDevitt**, retired MSgt working at the 12 OG at Randolph AFB briefed the reunion attendees on civilian life support slots that are opening up this fall or 1st quarter 2004. Mark informed me that the program has been put on hold. His comments are as follows:

*"The conversion from LS military to civilian jobs has been placed on hold! Someone high above "blew it" and did not fund for all the civilian positions. Looks like the AF will have to palm for the \$\$ and that could take 3-5 years unless they find the money from somewhere else. I will keep you posted as information is passed down and of any changes that may occur! Sorry for the bad news as I was pretty excited about the conversion but I hope and pray its sooner than later!"*

### **FIRST FEMALE IN LIFE SUPPORT**

*We now have documented proof of who was the first female in life support. As suggested in the last newsletter, it is Vickie Stevenson. Don Bock sent in the following article.*



## ***Easter Bonnet***

A1C Vickie Stevens tries on a flight helmet, not really to wear in the Easter parade but as part of the course she is attending. Airman Stevenson is the first woman to attend Chanute's Aircrew Life Support Course. According to course officials, she is the first WAF in the career field. The fair airman is the distaff side of an Air Force team. Her husband is a jet engine mechanic at Eglin AFB, Fla., and talked her into signing up and getting into this career field, his former. After her May 25 graduation, Airman Stevenson will join her spouse at Eglin. (U.S. Air Force Photo.)

"The above article was carried in the base newspaper; "Chanute This Week", dated Friday, April 13, 1973. (Vol. 2, Number 4, page 14). The first female to enter the Aircrew Life Support career field was A1C Vickie Stevenson. Please note an apparent

typo in the introductory sentence under the photo (i.e., "Stevens"). "Stevenson" is the actual name and is repeated twice in the follow-on information under the photo, and is also evident from her nametag," Don said.

### **LOST LIFE SUPPORTER**

Chief Rooney reported the following: "I'm sad to say **CMSgt (ret) Lewis Dodgen**, Life Science Equipment Laboratory Analyst, passed away. Mr. Dodgen gave many years of service to the POW/MIA Personnel Accounting mission, providing closure to the families of the missing, and will be deeply missed by his friends and colleagues."

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Although he was not a life supporter I'd like to pass along the following: **Four-star Gen. W. L. "Bill" Creech**, who in the 1970s turned around the supposedly languishing Tactical Air Command and oversaw the development of such modern air weaponry as the F-117 stealth fighter, died 26 Aug in Henderson, NV. He was 76. Known as the "The Father of the Thunderbirds," Gen. Creech was credited with rescuing the Air Force's Aerial Demonstration Team from congressional cuts after four pilots were killed in 1982 during a training exercise.

### **FOUND LIFE SUPPORTERS**

**Les Abbot** disappeared a few years ago and nobody seemed to know what happened to him. Les *sent the following e-mail*:

*"Been out of touch awhile, out of the country a few years. Been working in Edinburgh, Scotland for Kinko's Europe. My wife passed on in 97, both kids finished school and were out on their own, so I took a 'long tour' to Europe. Done with that. Anyway, I got back 5 months ago. Just on a whim, I did a Google search for life support and there it was the LS website! Perused the newsletters and got your email. I figured it was only a matter of time till you ran out of stamps. In fact, the last time I was in contact with you it was to send stamps. Shortly after that I left the states. Well it's good to be back in some decent weather for a change. I'll stay in touch."*

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**Bill Mullen**, former personal equipment instructor at Chanute from April '63 until Jul '66 also found us via the Internet. Bill wants you all to know that it is probably safe to say that if you went through PE School on "B" shift during that time you were in one of his classes! Bill went on to say:

*"I had hoped to make a career of the Air Force - but by the time I entered the last year of my enlistment it was obvious that my elderly parents were going to need my assistance caring for them (they did) and I had to scrap those plans. I spent one year working for the J.C. Penney Co. (I hated it!) and then on 11 September 1967 went to work for Eastern Airlines and that turned into a 35-year career that ended on 06 December 2002 when I retired. At the time Eastern went out of business on 18 January 1991 I was assigned to the Eastern CRS (Computer Reservations System) subsidiary*

*System One Corp. and on 01 September 1991 that was acquired by EDS, the company that was founded by Ross Perot. One never knows how their career is going to turn out!"*

Others who have been located are listed in bold font on the address list found on our web page.

If you did not attend the reunion, you missed a good one. Some of you did attend but had to leave early such as Chief Rooney, Chief Bruno, etc. You guys did not get to see the Passing the Torch Ceremony and I regret that no one was there to tape it. If any of the attendees were fortunate enough to take pictures of it I would appreciate a copy. I'll put them on the web page. The reunion book should be out soon and I'm sure there will be pictures of the ceremony in it. If you did not order a copy you might be able to get one by calling the company that's doing the book at 1-800-846-6335. Ask for a copy of job # 03-113, or the Life Support Reunion Memory Book.

Some of the retirees got together and composed a letter of appreciation that was sent out to the troops at Nellis AFB for their tremendous support of the reunion. That letter is on page 9.

**Frank Provenzano** pulled off the impossible, he managed some how to get us a bus that was used to transport some of the attendees to and from the picnic. The bus turned out to be for high-ranking officers and was very comfortable. If we didn't say so before, thank you Frank and thank you to all the wives and guest that helped out elsewhere. I understand that Frank was also responsible for sending out a separate letter of appreciation to the troops at Nellis AFB.

And finally, thanks again for all the letters, e-mails, pictures, and historical information that everyone sent in. Some of it was used to make our reunion the great success that it was.

Chili

## **The Aircrew Life Support Challenge Coin**



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The image above is of the coin I had made to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Aircrew Life Support. I ordered over 1500 of these coins and have all ready sold most of them. They sell for \$5 each, plus shipping. I can and will order additional coins if necessary to accommodate all who will want one.

The obverse design includes the life support system patch with the new stripes and the various enlisted and officer life support AFSC's that we have had over the years. The reverse side shows the old patch with the old stripes. I included LSO rank on the coin, but only 1st Lieutenant through "full bird" Colonel.

If you would like to order this coin e-mail me at [mcelwain@charter.net](mailto:mcelwain@charter.net) and tell me how many you want along with a shipping address. I will e-mail you back



with the shipping cost. If you have to use snail mail you can write to me. My address is at the top of the newsletter.

The coin will only be sold to the following:

1. Graduates of the AF Life Support, Personal Equipment, or Life Support Officer's course. You may also purchase this coin if you worked in life support before these courses existed.
2. Others may own this coin, but only if it was awarded or given to him/her by a life supporter as defined above.
3. If you work in life support, but did not graduate from one of the courses mentioned above, you have to be awarded or given the coin as indicated in 2 above.

NOTE: It will be impossible to determine who buys this coin, however, as part of the coin challenge, any coin owner who can not get a life supporter to verify that he/she is a legitimate owner of the coin is subject to bodily harm by everyone in his/her presence that is a legitimate owner of a coin ☺.

### [An Open Letter of Appreciation to the Nellis AFB Life Supporters](#)

July 25, 2003

Brigadier General Gregory J. Hyde  
Commander  
57<sup>th</sup> Wing  
4430 Grissom Avenue  
Suite 206  
Nellis AFB, NV 89191

Dear General Hyde,

We wish to extend our sincere appreciation and gratitude to the men and women of the Nellis AFB Life Support Community for their superb assistance during our recent Life Support reunion in Las Vegas.

Our Life Support reunion was very special because it commemorated the significant milestone of 50 years since creation of the career field and was attended by many of the “Life Supporters” from the very early days of the 1950’s era. Your young people gave us “old-timers” the opportunity to witness the strong future of the Life Support career field, as they were all simply impressive in their knowledge, presentation, and pride in the Air Force they so ably serve.

We specifically want to thank your personnel in arranging transportation for the visits to your base, to the USAF Thunderbirds, Base facilities, and the picnic in the park. Their briefings were professional, impressive, and informative to all of the attendees. In short, they made us feel at home! Along with the Nellis AFB Honor Guard, they added honor and dignity to our “Passing of the Torch Ceremony.” This special reunion would not have been as successful without the devoted involvement and support of your personnel.

On behalf of the entire Life Support retiree community, please extend a well-deserved thank you to the Nellis AFB Honor Guard and the following Life Support personnel:

57<sup>th</sup> Wing Life Support (57 OSS/OSTL)  
SMSgt Lee J. Hawkins  
MSgt Michael A. Cortez

USAF Thunderbirds (USAF ADS/DOTL)  
TSgt Ronald J. Rusek  
TSgt Gabriel Quintana

Weapons School (57 WPSS/WSL)  
TSgt Keith Mitchell  
SSgt Lawanda J. Hansen  
SRA Jennifer Solis  
SRA Leonard Bravo  
A1C Angela Gonzales  
A1C Trevor D. Filliland

Transportation – Bus Driver  
A1C Matthew A. Reid (99LRS/LCRVO)

Respectfully Yours,

DONALD L. MUIR  
Colonel, USAF (Ret.)