



Through the centuries, the enlisted man has been known by the chevrons he wears.

# A Study in Stripes

By Walter J. Boyne

**T**he principal insignia of the Air Force's enlisted ranks—that is, their “stripes”—has a complex history that dates back for centuries. In light of the Air Force's growing interest in highlighting service history and heritage, some basic facts about the stripes are worth recounting.

The stripes that enlisted airmen wear on their uniform sleeves can be traced to the chevrons worn by the rank-and-file soldiers of the British Army during the time of the Napoleonic wars in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Even the term “chevron” has a history. In heraldic terms, the chevron means an architectural arch or rafter. In other words, it denotes a strengthening mechanism. This is surely apt, as nothing strengthens a unit more than the men and women who wear the chevrons, the “stripes.”

Members of the British Army took pride in forming what it called its “thin red line” to halt Napoleon's advances. The thin red line usually comprised large units of soldiers formed up and armed with a variety of weapons. The units needed leaders to supervise operations, ensure fire discipline, and see to it that maneuver orders were carried out. In each squad, a corporal was placed in charge. He was the unifying cornerstone of the squad, and the chevron he wore symbolized that corner position.

A larger unit, the equivalent of a modern platoon, had a sergeant in charge, wearing another angled chevron. Over the ensuing years, the style and execution of these chevrons varied greatly, gathering complexity as they came to describe rank, branch, and duties.

In 1782, Gen. George Washington authorized the first American use of

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*A wreath encircling the star distinguished the insignia of USAF's first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Paul Airey (left), from that of a chief master sergeant.*

stripes. They were worn as a means of indicating years of service—“hash marks” in later parlance. This idea was invoked again in 1863 and once more in 1904. Since then, stripes have become an essential if extremely variable aspect of US uniforms.

The first extant official US Army document on stripes is dated 1821. Captains and lieutenants wore gold chevrons; the more senior enlisted—sergeants and corporals—wore silver ones. While the officers ceased wearing

their gold chevrons after a decade, the enlisted men wouldn't give them up.

## Up and Down

At first, enlisted chevrons pointed downward. That lasted until the Spanish American War era, when it changed. Thereafter, the Army chevron's apex always was at the top of the insignia.

The first USAF-related insignia was created when the Army formed the Aeronautical Division of the US Army Signal Corps on Aug. 1, 1907.



**USAF initially adapted Army enlisted insignia, like this one (above) for a technician fifth grade. At right, the director of the Enlisted Heritage Hall, CMSgt. Malcolm McVicar (right), discusses changes to uniforms with Gen. T. Michael Moseley, USAF Chief of Staff. McVicker is wearing a sergeant's uniform.**



USAF photo by Carl Bergquist

The members of this new “air force” wore the standard Army uniform and insignia, including the crossed signal flags emblem of the Signal Corps. The Aeronautical Division became an Aviation Section in 1914, and in 1918, it evolved into the Army Air Service, no longer a part of the Signal Corps. The “crossed signal flag” emblem became a winged propeller, but the stripes remained those of the Army, and did so even after the Air Force gained its independence on Sept. 18, 1947.

After USAF’s creation, however, change was in the wind. Airmen were to get a new and distinctive blue uniform, and it was in need of new insignia. In March 1948, a comparatively small sample of 150 airmen was polled as to preference, and a majority selected a chevron with a center circle encompassing a star, with wing-like stripes swept upward. The size of the chevron for men was fixed at four inches, for women, at three inches.

The new blue uniform, which was adopted in 1949, had new inverted chevrons but retained old Army rank designations.

The new Air Force’s rank titles remained in the Army’s traditional order, with stripes descending in order from the E-7 master sergeant, with three upper and three rocker stripes, down to the E-1 private, with no stripes. (See box: “When the Ranks and Stripes Crossed Over,” p. 68.) Moving from private to private first class, and thereby getting that first stripe, was of high importance to young airmen.

At the senior level of the noncommissioned ladder was a key rank, that of first sergeant. The first sergeant had the same six stripes as a master sergeant, but there were no questions then or now as to who was in charge; the first sergeant runs things.

His or her position was acknowledged by an insignia change in September 1954, when the new Chief of Staff, Gen. Nathan F. Twining, approved the addition of a diamond (sometimes called a “lozenge”) in the center of the insignia.

Hasty post-World War II demobilization caused all sorts of personnel “humps” in the Air Force, and neither the officer nor the enlisted force rank structures were well-balanced. Studies in 1950 and 1951 concluded that the enlisted force imbalance might be redressed if the total number of noncommissioned officers was reduced by changing some rank titles.

In 1952, Air Force Regulation 39-36 effected change. The master, technical, and staff sergeant rank and insignia remained the same. However, the stripe-less private became the stripe-less basic airman (later, airman basic). The private first class became airman third class, with one stripe; the corporal became airman second class, retaining two stripes; while the sergeant became the airman first class, with three stripes.

Many sergeants perceived their loss of noncommissioned status as a demotion.

A proposal to change the insignia to

have straight wings instead of upward closing wings was considered favorably but was later personally rejected by Twining.

Over time, enlisted demographics changed rapidly, as did retention rates. In 1956, the Cordiner Committee found that about 80 percent of first-term airmen were not re-enlisting, and it was estimated that fully 40 percent of their first-term time had been spent in training. In addition, the Air Force, deeply engaged in both the Cold War and the space race, was becoming much more technologically advanced.

The committee recommended adding two additional grades, E-8 and E-9, in numbers representing two percent and one percent of the total enlisted force, respectively.

### **Making the Supergrade**

The Military Pay Act of 1958 authorized the suggested grades of E-8 and E-9, bringing about the then-revolutionary concept of the “supergrade.” This act was a visionary step, emphasizing the need for trained technical supervisory personnel, and resulted in the creation of the truly elite noncommissioned force that serves our Air Force today.

There were delays, of course, before actual promotions were made, giving time to make an initial selection of 2,000 of the best qualified personnel to be promoted to E-8 from the pool of some 45,000 master sergeants. The numbers within the promotion pool were not increased, as the E-

8s (and later the E-9s) had to come from the same quota as the E-7s. As of September 2006, there was a total of 273,990 members in the enlisted force. Of these, 2,704 (.98 percent) were E-9s, and 5,514 (two percent) were E-8s.

The creation of the supergrades displaced the duties and the prestige of the warrant officers. The last Air Force warrant officers were appointed in 1959. Some warrant officers reverted to noncommissioned status, some became commissioned, and others remained in that rank until they retired. The last active duty USAF warrant officer, CWO-4 James H. Long, retired in 1980.

The Air Force turned to the field again to select titles for the new E-8 and E-9 grades. In deference to the enormous respect for the existing body of master sergeants, the terms senior master sergeant and chief master sergeant were chosen for the new titles. For the senior master sergeant, the standard master sergeant insignia was enhanced with an additional stripe; the chief master sergeant rated two. Anyone privileged to have one of those ranks and also be a first sergeant, receives the additional diamond.

By October 1967, another revision had been made, with the principal aim of restoring NCO status to the E-4 by changing the title from airman first class to sergeant. The effort aligned the Air Force with other service rank structures and had a positive effect on re-enlistment rates.

By 1991, things had changed again. NCOs at that time represented 77 percent of the Air Force, with E-4s accounting for 28 percent of the NCOs. Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, the USAF Chief of Staff, faced a Congressionally mandated reduction in force. He announced the E-4 NCO status was revoked, effective May 1991, leaving the E-4 grade solely to the senior airman rank created in December 1975 [correction]. Staff sergeants thus became, again, the entry NCO position. Their stripes, however, did not change.

The desirability of having senior enlisted advisors to commanders at wings, numbered air forces, field operating agencies, and major command levels was evident. The title of senior enlisted advisor was changed to command chief master sergeant in November 1998. The new rank insignia was that of the chief master sergeant with a silver star in the upper field.

When the senior enlisted position

## When the Ranks and Stripes Crossed Over

The Army ranks adopted by the Air Force, from lowest to highest, were as follows:

- ✦ Private (no stripes)
- ✦ Private, First Class (one inverted V upward stripe)
- ✦ Corporal or Technician Fifth Grade (two upward stripes or two upward stripes with the capital letter T under the stripes)
- ✦ Sergeant or Technician Fourth Grade (three upward stripes or three upward stripes with the capital letter T underneath)
- ✦ Staff Sergeant or Technician Third Grade (three upward stripes with one “rocker” stripe or the same with a T in the space between the stripes and the rocker)
- ✦ Technical Sergeant (three upward and two rocker stripes)
- ✦ Master Sergeant (three upward and three rocker stripes)
- ✦ First Sergeant (same as a master sergeant’s stripes, but with a diamond between the upward stripes and the rocker stripes)

of a joint command is held by an Air Force member, that member is also designated as a command chief master sergeant.

The invaluable work done by the senior enlisted advisors was another consideration in the long-sought creation of the rank of Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force in 1967. Also in that year, the Navy established the post of Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. The Marine Corps was ahead of the pack—it had created its post of Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps in 1957, and the Army had established the post of Sergeant Major of the Army in 1966.

### Adding a Wreath

The first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, Paul W. Airey, gave the rank prestige and power from the start and took seriously his role of representing the interests of the enlisted force. Airey, a combat veteran, former prisoner of war, and dedicated professional, was hand-picked by Gen. John P. McConnell, the Chief of Staff, and told to “take this job and run with it.”

This unique position obviously deserved a unique insignia. On March 3, 1967, the standard chief master sergeant insignia was enhanced with a star encircled by a wreath in the interior

field, to become the insignia of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. Then, on Nov. 1, 2004, the insignia was further updated to include the Great Seal of the United States of America, and two stars, in the upper field. This addition was made to conform to the style of the equivalent position in the Marine Corps and the Army. The laurel wreath-enclosed star in the lower field was retained to maintain the tradition established with Airey.

The issue of stripes was just a small element in the teapot tempest surrounding McPeak’s changes to the Air Force uniform in the early 1990s. The change to the stripes was rather subtle (in contrast to the change in the uniforms), and they became somewhat larger and brighter than before.

There were many minor perturbations in the stripes story over the years, most of which did not seriously impinge on the day-to-day recognition of who was wearing what rank. These include a convoluted series of changes in the application of stripes to formal wear, raincoats, and shoulder boards.

The history of Air Force stripes is a proud one. From the insignia of the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force all the way down to that of the E-2 airman, they are stripes of dignified elegance. ■

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