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United States Air Force Security Service

An Enlisted Command

1. The United States Air Force Security Service (USAFSS) was a major Air Force command for over three decades with a unique enlisted force. A close knit organization, the USAFSS stands as an example of the capabilities of highly motivated enlisted personnel. In 1976 USAFSS was composed of nearly 93 percent enlisted personnel. This compares with only 70 percent for the rest of the Air Force.(4:133-134) Having over 90 percent of the command as enlisted personnel resulted in a sharp focus on enlisted empowerment. The USAFSS was years ahead of the Air Force in using and recognizing their enlisted corps. Today the Air Force is continually increasing the responsibilities placed on NCOs. The USAFSS was doing this over 20 years ago. Included here is some anecdotal evidence which includes comments by former CMSgt of the Air Force (CMSAF) Kisling and other personnel from the USAFSS, both officer and enlisted, and both past and present. There are also numerous examples gleaned from USAFSS publications that indicate the importance of the enlisted force to this unique command.
2. Former CMSAF Richard D. Kisling became a member of the USAFSS in August of 1963. The USAFSS had no aircraft assigned and no offensive mission in the Air Force. Not well known to the rest of the Air Force, they formed a tight knit community of enlisted personnel that was not open to outsiders. CMSAF Kisling commented in his Oral History Interview that it was very evident that for the first 6 or 8 months in the command they did not trust you. After you had been around awhile, they would finally accept you as being a member of their organization. During his tenure in the USAFSS, CMSAF Kisling was surprised to discover some of the unique incentives provided to USAFSS personnel. One was the policy of providing a double promotion

for serving two consecutive tours overseas. Promotions in the Air Force were at a very low point after the Korean Conflict. The USAFSS worked very hard to promote their people, within the parameters allowed by the Air Force at the time. This system was not Air Force policy and was not talked about openly outside of USAFSS.(3:-) The main reason for the system was to keep the operational personnel committed to USAFSS and stay in the Air Force.

3. CMSAF Kisling believed that most personnel were highly qualified and well trained. They were selected from the top 3 or 4 percent of the inductees into the Air Force. Only personnel with the highest Air Qualifying Examination scores were selected for USAFSS. This brought a better educated enlisted force into the command and was one of the reasons for some of the “special” enlisted programs.(3:-) In fact, the percentage of enlisted eligible for specialties in the USAFSS was even less. According to Air Force Magazine of May 1979, only one percent of basic training graduates were qualified for USAFSS skills.(5:96-97) The USAFSS truly skimmed the cream from the enlisted inductees.

4. In addition, the USAFSS had the highest enlisted to officer ratio of any Air Force command.(7:11) This was coupled with very unique work conditions. Working in a highly classified environment, most personnel worked in enclosed environments, with no windows. Environmentally controlled buildings that ensured nobody knew what went on inside also ensured that inside nobody knew what went on outside, rain or shine. Not being able to come home and talk about your work, or share any of your experiences with the rest of your Air Force partners bred close camaraderie within many USAFSS units. SMSgt Chambers (Ret) notes that the enlisted personnel were actually the ones who performed all of the technical tasks. In today’s terms, the mission of the USAFSS was to collect information, analyze it, and then provide it to our national decision makers. The mission was performed 24-hours a day, normally

by four flights, and was broken into a rotating shift structure. Some of the large units had 100-120 personnel per flight with only a junior officer as the flight commander. This person was usually a Lieutenant or junior Captain, usually straight from technical school. In the combat commands the enlisted loaded the bombs while the officers dropped them. In USAFSS the enlisted collected the information, processed it, and then reported it up the chain, usually to national-level command authorities. For the most part, the enlisted performed the job and the enlisted supervised the job.(1:-) USAFSS NCOs were shouldering increased responsibilities and moving into position formerly confined to the officer corps.(7:11)

5. Early in the USAFSS, enlisted personnel ran most, if not all, aspects of their rotating shifts. SMSgt Chambers explained why officers came to assume the position of flight commanders at USAFSS ground units. It was often told that USAFSS was forced to install an officer as the senior person on each flight because USAFE (United States Air Forces Europe) complained they had no officer to conduct business with at the flight level. USAFE would often call a unit, usually during a crisis type situation, and ask for the officer in charge, only to find it was a sergeant. This did not sit well with the protocol-minded officers in USAFE and resulted in officers being introduced into the flight structure.(1:-) This brought a more traditional Air Force structure into USAFSS operations. Each flight had one officer with Senior NCOs performing most supervisory duties. However, the normal working ratio was still 1 officer to over 100 enlisted personnel. A daunting challenge for a young officer, usually a 1st or 2nd Lieutenant serving his/her first tour in the Air Force. This doesn't mean there were not more officers within USAFSS. The overall ratio was approximately 10 to 1, but this included overall unit command structure and officers at the headquarters level (where a much higher ratio existed). It is also important to note that officer/enlisted relations were not poor. On the contrary most young

officers quickly came to understand their unique work relationships with enlisted personnel and allowed their NCOs to perform their job.

6. LtCol Paul A. Gifford was both an enlisted and officer member of the USAFSS. He believes that because USAFSS enlisted personnel were required to step out of the routine and recognize potential crisis situations, they were entrusted with a more than the normal amount of responsibility. The USAFSS entrusted their enlisted personnel with positions that rightly should have been held by an officer. Enlisted personnel on US reconnaissance aircraft often made decisions that aborted the aircraft and, during wartime, took pilots out of harms way. However, during the Vietnam war it was decided that the USAFSS crews on board US reconnaissance aircraft should be led by an officer. USAFSS sent enlisted personnel who were college graduates to Officer Training School and returned them to USAFSS flying units. The program worked moderately well, because these officers had enlisted experience. However, it was discontinued because it tied an officer to one system and would jeopardize his/her promotion opportunities. The program was eventually stopped and enlisted personnel returned as the senior USAFSS personnel on the aircraft.(2:-) This practice continues to this day.

7. As time progressed in the USAFSS, recognition of the importance of the enlisted contribution continued to grow. In 1977 USAFSS became the first major command to bring their "Ten Outstanding Airmen of the Year" to their headquarters for command recognition. Other commands selected people to go forward in the "12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year", but USAFSS was the only command at the time to institute a complete recognition program.(6:8)

8. The USAFSS was disbanded in 1979 and became the Electronic Security Command (ESC). The Commander for the USAFSS at this time was MGen Doyle E. Larson. He started his career as an enlisted member of the USAFSS and rose to be the commander. In 1979, almost half of

the officer force in the USAFSS were prior enlisted taken from the ranks of USAFSS itself.(5:96-97) It is quite fitting that the last commander of USAFSS was prior enlisted, rising from the ranks of USAFSS itself. As the first commander of ESC, MGen Larson was uniquely suited to direct this new command into the future.

9. Now called the Air Intelligence Agency (AIA), the tradition of enlisted empowerment continues. With the changing missions of the USAF and AIA our enlisted/officer ratio has grown much closer. However, this has not diminished the need for our enlisted corps to step up to increased responsibilities. In 1995, two enlisted members of AIA became the first enlisted members in the Air Force to complete the Air Combat Command-sponsored Aggressor Course. This course is designed to train personnel on adversary tactics and weapons systems. It was an “officer-only” course, closed to enlisted personnel.(8:15) LtCol Gifford writes that in his thirty-plus years he has watched the difference between officers and enlisted narrow and virtually overlap. The difference in education is minimal and often the difference in responsibility is minimal. In many respects our NCOs practice more leadership sooner than most of our officers.(2:-) These NCO’s are continuing the tradition of the USAFSS. Twenty years later they are breaking new ground for the enlisted force in the United States Air Force.

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