

# First Sergeantry

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What's in a name? Many people, William Shakespeare for one, will tell you words in themselves don't have much meaning or value. "Would a rose by any other name still smell sweet?" I, on the other hand, feel words hold tremendous meaning and invoke passionate feelings from those who hear the word. Two words instantly come to my mind that generate this type of sensation; they are "FIRST SERGEANT." These two simple words hold volumes of history, tradition, honor, and service. What do the words *first sergeant* mean to you, to our Air Force leaders, our squadron commanders, our troops, and our families? I'm sure the words first sergeant mean many things to many people. I would like to share some history, some insight, and the possible future of first sergeants and first sergeantry.

The word *first* is defined as the number *one*, coming or taking place before all others, and acting prior to all others. Some synonyms are initial, original, pioneer, foremost, and leading. The word *sergeant* comes from the Latin noun *servient* meaning *servant* and is derived from the Latin verb *servire*, to serve. The term for sergeant in Middle French was *servent*.

During the Middle Ages each lord maintained a number of armed men to guard his castle. These fighting men were commanded by a captain, usually a hired mercenary soldier who had risen from the ranks through his ability. The soldiers were the lord's servants or *serventes*. This title changed through use to *sergentes*, or *sergeants* in modern English.

These are just definitions of words, but they are the foundation of first sergeantry. First sergeants are called many things and go by many names: top, top kick, first shirt, or just shirt, to name a few. How did first sergeants come to be known by these names? To find these answers we need to go back into our Army history. The Army first sergeant of the past, just like today, held the highest enlisted position within a company or platoon. This person was the leader—the one who maintained control of the unit. He ensured good order, discipline, and morale. Because he held this top position within the ranks, he often represented the concerns of the enlisted force to senior leadership and also enforced the decisions of senior leadership. First sergeants were affectionately referred to by other soldiers as *top* or *top kick*. The term *first*

*shirt* goes back to the days of the Indian wars in the American West during the second half of the nineteenth century. When the supply wagon would finally find the soldiers after months on the range, the first sergeant would inspect all the supplies as they were unloaded from the wagons. He would then receive the first new shirt to replace the old ragged one he was wearing. Hence, the term *first shirt*. Today this term has been shortened to just *shirt*. In themselves these words are in fact just words. But, as you can see, in addition to being just words, they hold years of tradition, sweat, service, and sacrifice.

While we're reflecting on history, let me give you a brief account of the first sergeant's history. The first sergeant has always held a highly responsible and distinctive role throughout our military history. First sergeantry can be traced back to the seventeenth-century Prussian army. The Prussian army *feldwebel* or company sergeant seems to have combined both the duties of a modern first sergeant with those of the sergeant major (or chief master sergeant in the Air Force). Being at the top of the enlisted hierarchy, the *feldwebels* became the overseers of the noncommissioned officers (NCO). Their duties and responsibilities were as numerous as they were varied. They kept the *hauptman* (headman), or captain, informed of everything that went on in the company—whether the NCOs were performing their duties in a satisfactory manner, ensuring that training was properly conducted, and finally, at the end of the duty day, making sure that all soldiers were accounted for and in their quarters. When Gen George Washington was forming the Continental Army, he relied heavily on the writings and talents of Gen Baron Fredrich Wilhelm Von Steuben. Von Steuben had written what is referred to as the "Blue Book" of regulations. This Blue Book contained most of the organizational, administrative, and disciplinary details necessary to operate the Continental Army. While Von Steuben outlined the duties of the sergeant major, quartermaster sergeant, and other key NCOs, it was to the company first sergeant, the American equivalent of the Prussian *feldwebel*, that he directed most of his attention and writing. These noncommissioned officers, chosen by the officers of the company, became the linchpin of the company. They maintained the good order, discipline, and morale of the members of the unit. They ensured the good conduct of the troops, their exactness in obeying orders, and the regularity of their manners. In order for the first sergeant to perform these tasks efficiently and effectively, he had to be intimately

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acquainted with the character of every soldier in his company. He took great pains to impress upon their minds the necessity of strict obedience as the foundation of order and discipline. Once again, the name *top kick* was used by many soldiers to refer to their first sergeants.

Their tasks were to maintain the duty roster in an equitable manner, to take the daily orders in a book and show them to their officers, to make the morning report of the state of the company in the form prescribed to the captain and, at the same time, inform him about anything of interest that might have happened in the company since the previous report. First sergeants also maintained a descriptive book listing the names, ages, heights, places of birth, and prior occupations of all enlisted members in the company. This practice continued until the first decade of the twentieth century when it was replaced by the Morning Report, locator cards, and finally our computerized systems of today. Since the first sergeant was responsible for the entire company, he was not to go on duty without the entire company. On the march or in the battlefield, the top kick was never to lead a platoon or section, but always to be the file closer in the formation of the company, his duty in the company being like that of the adjutant's in the regiment. This did not mean that first sergeants were not faced with the dangers of battle. There is a record of at least 90 first sergeants who have received our nation's highest honor, the Medal of Honor. The first recipient of this medal was Frederick R. Jackson, First Sergeant, Company F, 7th Connecticut Infantry; "Having his left arm shot away in a charge on the enemy. He continued on duty. Taking part in a second and a third charge until he fell exhausted from the loss of blood."

At first glance, it appears not much has changed in the field of first sergeantry. First sergeants are still on call 24 hours a day to respond to any situation, and they still march at the rear of their squadron formations. However, there have been some significant changes in first sergeantry over the years. The first big change came in the early 1830s when first sergeants were given a red sash to wear around the waist to distinguish them from other soldiers. Pay was increased with a new pay scale enacted by Congress in 1833; established new pay rates were as follows: sergeant major, quartermaster sergeant, and chief musician—\$16 per month; company first sergeant—\$15 per month; all other sergeants—\$12 per month. In 1847 the regulations for the uniform of the Army of the United States authorized the wear of the chevrons on the fatigue jacket for noncommissioned officers. It also authorized the lozenge (French for diamond) to designate the first sergeant. The lozenge is still proudly worn by over 12,000 first sergeants in today's Air Force. Before we leave our Army first sergeant heritage and transition into our Air Force history, I would like to offer a quote from an article by Col Charles A. Romeyn, printed in *The Cavalry Journal*, July 1925: "After many years' effort, we at last got our First Sergeant a big increase in pay. Yet, I believe we have not gone far enough. They are the most important enlisted person in the Army, give them the most pay and I

almost feel like making all Second Lieutenants salute them. The ones I have worked with in the past and many others, I would gladly give the first salute. The First Sergeant is the Captain's Chief of Staff. A poor one will ruin a good troop no matter what kind of Captain they have. And many a poor Captain has had his reputation saved and his troop kept, or made good, by a fine First Sergeant."

In 1947, the Air Force became a separate service, and the position of first sergeant and the profession of first sergeantry faced some difficult changes. First sergeant became a position rather than a rank and could be held by a technical or master sergeant and later by a senior or chief master sergeant. This is one reason the terms *top* and *top kick* did not carry over from our Army traditions. However, the term *first shirt* or *shirt* still seemed to fit and is used by many Air Force troops today. Many years have passed since the *feldwebel*, to the inspector and records keeper of General Von Steuben's *Blue Book*, to the sash-wearing soldiers of the 1830s, all the way to today's first sergeant who still exercises general supervision over all assigned enlisted personnel. Yet, one theme always rang clear: the first sergeant is now and always has been in the business of helping people. Our Air Force history is full of great leaders who have always placed the needs of the Air Force and its people above all else. Two people come to mind right away, CMSAF Robert Gaylor and CMSAF James Binnicker. They were both first sergeants before they went on to hold our Air Force's highest enlisted position.

Today's theme is no different. The "shirt" must always be first, unless closing the ranks. They must be first to put their people and the mission before themselves. First to stand up and say something is wrong. First to admit when he or she is wrong. First to support plans, programs, and policies regardless of how popular or unpopular they may be. First sergeants must be the first to volunteer, first to lead, and the first to follow. They must lead by example, be pioneers, be original—in other words, they must be the first sergeant. I can think of no better way to define the role of today's first sergeant than to use the words of a past chief first sergeant and commandant of the USAF First Sergeant Academy, CMSgt Eric Williams. His words echoed throughout the halls of the First Sergeant Academy on 2 February 2000 when the Academy dedicated the Commandant's Award to him. The keynote speaker, CMSgt Ken Van Holbeck, USTC and AMC/CCC shared these words from CMSgt Eric Williams's retirement speech:

- First sergeants are an extension of the unit commander. They are not "babysitters" of the enlisted force.
- First sergeants are recognized as leaders by always setting the example for others to follow. They are not recognized as leaders simply because they wear a diamond.
- First sergeants and unit commanders are seen as a team. First sergeants and unit commanders are not seen as "buddies."

- First sergeants are the liaison between the commander and the enlisted members of the unit. They are not the commander’s “mouthpiece.”
- First sergeants are required to support their fellow first sergeants as members of the base First Sergeants Council. They are not too busy or too important to fulfill this professional obligation.
- First sergeants are a source of assistance to help their enlisted people solve their own problems. They are not required to solve their troops’ problems for them.
- First sergeants are the focal point within the unit for all matters concerning enlisted people. They are not the only NCOs in the unit who correct, discipline, motivate, counsel, recognize, or develop the troops—these are responsibilities of first-line supervisors.
- First sergeants are expected to work long and irregular hours. They are not expected to jeopardize their health by working themselves to death.
- First sergeants are responsible for the general upkeep and maintenance of the unit dormitory. They are not responsible for behavioral problems in the unit dormitory—this is a responsibility of the first-line supervisor.
- First sergeants are expected to work closely with the installation command chief master sergeant. First sergeants are not supervised by the command chief master sergeant—they work for the unit commander.

- First sergeants are fully committed to the unit, mission, and people. They are not expected to forsake their families and loved ones by allowing their first-sergeant duties to consume their lives.
- Finally, first sergeants are expected to be visible and accessible to their people. They are not going to keep their fingers on the pulse of the squadron by sitting in their offices.

As with life, so it is with first sergeantry—the past is our present and will be our future. The roles, duties, and responsibilities of a first sergeant have not changed much since the inception of military organizations. I see future first sergeants doing much the same things they have always done. Being the first to serve their people so their people can serve their country. That’s what it is all about, being a force multiplier. By keeping our troops focused on the mission and not on their problems, we will have a stronger, more effective and efficient force. The only thing that has changed is the way first sergeants perform their duties. We have gone from the *top kick* who used whatever means necessary to maintain good order and discipline, to the *first shirt* who uses finely tuned and polished leadership practices to guide today’s highly educated and technically advanced troops. I don’t know what problems tomorrow’s first sergeants will face, but I’m sure they will be the first to serve.