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# Stripes – A brief history of Air Force enlisted ranks

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10/25/2011 - **SCHRIEVER AIR FORCE BASE, Colo.** -- The use of chevrons to denote standing in a military force dates back more than a millennia. Religious and civil authorities used outward symbols to identify rank or standing before the time of the Crusades. In the U.S. military, the use of chevrons included a variety of epaulets, sashes, hat ornaments and stripes. A War Department General Order in 1821 provides the first reference to U.S. Soldiers, including officers, wearing chevrons. By 1829, the use of chevrons by officers began to phase out.

The air arm, for its entire existence before the creation of the U.S. Air Force, was a component of the U.S. Army. Air Corps and U.S. Army Air Forces enlisted chevrons were dictated by Army regulations. When the Air Force was authorized in the National Security Act of 1947, the transition from the Army began. Although many air power experts had advocated for a separate Air Force for years, the development of a unique uniform for the new service was not ready for implementation.

By March 1948, the current stripes were undergoing testing at Bolling Air Force Base, D.C. A briefing to Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff at that time revealed that 55 percent of 150 Airmen polled approved of the design. That design (whether intentional or not is not known) resembles the shoulder patch worn by USAAF personnel during World War II. It is also reminiscent of the insignia used on aircraft. The upward slant of the stripes could symbolize wings or could be a variation of the chevrons worn by U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps personnel. The silver gray of the star and stripes provided a contrast to the khaki and later the blue uniform, which was first available for wear September 1950. The change in stripes did not change rank titles.

On Feb. 20, 1950 Vandenberg directed the term Airmen would be used for enlisted persons in the Air Force to differentiate them from Soldiers and Sailors. Prior to that directive, Air Force enlisted personnel continued to be called Soldiers. Still, Airmen maintained the rank titles from the U.S. Army. The revision to Air Force Regulation 39-36 April 24, 1952 finally gave the Air Force its own enlisted rank structure. That structure included basic airman, airman third class, airman second class, airman first class, staff sergeant, technical sergeant and master sergeant. In 1954, the new Chief of Staff Gen. Nathan F. Twining, approved the use of the diamond for first sergeants.

The Military Pay Act of 1958 added to the enlisted structure for all services the senior grades of E-8 and E-9. Implementing legislation provided little opportunity for the services to review rank structure, which with the two new grades would make five of the nine enlisted grades noncommissioned officers. The Air Force, therefore, delayed a review of grade structure and implemented the new grades with ranks of senior master sergeant and chief master sergeant based on recommendation from major commands. The Air Force chose a design, adding one top chevron and two top chevrons for the senior master sergeant and chief master sergeant, respectively.

These rank titles and stripes remained unchanged until the creation of the chief master sergeant of the Air Force position and special rank in 1967. During a review of the rank structure and proposals for the CMSAF stripes, the Air Staff determined to rename the enlisted ranks. The new structure included airman basic, airman, airman first class, sergeant and no changes to ranks above that, except to add the CMSAF.

In 1975 additional changes were imposed with the 3-tier force structure we know today as Airmen, E-1 through E-4; NCOs, E-4 through E-6; and senior NCOs, E-7 through E-9. The key change was the inclusion of the senior airman (E-4) who was not an NCO and the retention of the sergeant (E-4) who was. For Airmen, the silver star in the center of the stripes was changed to blue and was not generally visible. Citing reduction in force imbalances, Chief of Staff Gen. Merrill A. McPeak eliminated the E-4 sergeant rank in 1991. McPeak also recommended the uniform board return the star to Airmen (E-1 through E-4) stripes.

Finally, his recommendations moved one rocker from the senior NCO ranks to a top chevron, unifying the senior NCO tier stripes and creating the insignia worn by senior NCOs today. These recommendations were fully implemented by October 1997, when wear of the new stripe for all became mandatory, and culminated a history of honor and tradition that make the Air Force enlisted corps a superior and professional team.

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