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## **Air Force mourns loss of first CMSAF**

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WASHINGTON (AFRNS) -- Former Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Paul Wesley Airey died March 11 in Panama City, Fla. He was 85.

“Chief Airey was an Airman's Airman and one of the true pioneers for our service,” said Gen. Norton Schwartz, Air Force chief of staff. “He was a warrior, an innovator... and a leader with vision well ahead of his time. His legacy lives today in the truly professional enlisted force we have serving our nation... and for that we owe him a debt of gratitude.”

“Chief Airey is the most respected enlisted Airmen in the history of the Air Force,” said Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Rodney J. McKinley. “When we speak of today's Airmen standing upon the shoulders of giants as they reach for the sky and stars -- it was upon Paul Airey's shoulders they stood. We will truly miss his leadership, counsel and friendship.”

The first chief master sergeant of the Air Force was always a leader. During World War II he flew as a B-24 radio operator and additional duty aerial gunner. On his 28th mission, then-Technical Sergeant Airey and his fellow crewmen were shot down over Vienna, Austria, captured, and held prisoner by the German air force from July 1944 to May 1945. During his time as a prisoner of war he worked tirelessly to meet the basic needs of fellow prisoners, even through a 90-day forced march.

Chief Airey was born in Quincy, Mass., on Dec. 13, 1923. At 18, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec., 7, 1941, he quit high school to enlist in the Army Air Forces on Nov. 16, 1942. He later earned his high school equivalency certificate through off-duty study.

Chief Airey held the top enlisted title April 3, 1967 to July 31, 1969. During his tenure he worked to stop loan establishments from charging exorbitant rates outside the air base gates and to improve low retention during the Vietnam War. Chief Airey also led a team that laid the foundation for the Weighted Airman Promotion System, a system that has stood the test of time and which is still used today. He was an advocate for an Air Force-level Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy. His vision became reality when the academy opened in 1973, becoming the capstone in the development of Air Force senior NCOs.

Chief Airey retired Aug. 1, 1970. He continued advocating for Airmen's rights by serving on the boards of numerous Air Force and enlisted professional military organizations throughout the years. He was a member of the Board of Trustees for the Airmen Memorial Museum, a member of the Air Force Memorial Foundation and the Air University Foundation.

After retirement, Chief Airey lived in Panama City with his wife, Shirley. Mrs. Airey died in 2001.

Chief Airey was always proud of Airmen.

“I have seen many changes as we progressed from simple air power to today's aerospace force,” he said at

the Air Force's 20th Anniversary ceremony in 1967. "The enlisted corps has kept pace with that progress, for it is pride and dedication that keep enlisted men at their posts, not the lure of an easy life and secure future. It is the desire to serve our country that motivates today's Air Force."

On the north wall of the Air Force Memorial in Washington, Chief Airey's thoughts on Airmen are immortalized: "When I think of the enlisted force, I see dedication, determination, loyalty and valor."

The Air Force Association honored Chief Airey with its Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007.

Chief Airey truly spent a lifetime serving a nation and a force he loved, said Michael Donley, secretary of the Air Force. "From his first days flying World War II combat missions in Europe, to his work improving the welfare of enlisted personnel as the first chief master sergeant of the Air Force, and his recent role as a mentor to today's Airmen, Chief Airey was a man of honor and commitment to things greater than himself. His passing is mourned by all Airmen around the globe."