

I am writing to address some things pertaining to the rank and position of a Chief Master Sergeant that concern me—a lot. Things like, what is a Chief Master Sergeant supposed to be? What are the most important qualities that a Chief should have? How did Chief Master Sergeants evolve into what they are today? Who were their historical role models—and who guided them along their journey to achieving the rank of Chief. And my most pressing concern, how will future Chiefs see themselves, and how will they act?

I was born and raised in Iowa and, other than television and movies, I really had no exposure to the military. I enlisted in the Air Force in 1969, and it was nearly a year before I saw my first Chief Master Sergeant. From my limited knowledge of them, my guess was that regardless of the military branch, an E-9 was someone to be feared, and avoided at all costs. I was certainly prepared for the worst when the day would come that I would have to come face to face with one.

My first encounter came in 1970. I was assigned to the 2952d Combat Logistics Support Squadron on Tinker AFB, and when I arrived I saw on the sign in front of the building that they had a Chief Master Sergeant—CMSgt Kenneth Kuhns. As I was about to leave the orderly room with my in-processing checklist in hand he happened to come in—and (shock) he didn't yell at me—or anybody! My initial impression, as I recall, was that he was probably a nice person, and even though the respect of the orderly room staff was obvious, nobody seemed to be afraid of him! He was nothing like I expected, and in fact, I was almost disappointed! My thought was that he was probably not a typical Chief Master Sergeant. The following day at 0730 item one of my in-processing took me to his office (I loved that office! It dripped with mementos reflecting the Chief's long career and many assignments). Chief Kuhns proudly told me about "his" people assigned to the unit, their many accomplishments and where they were deployed all around the world. He spelled out the things that would be expected of me as a member of "his" squadron and that he believed that this could be the best unit I would ever be assigned to, but that ultimately it was up to me. He told me that as a new airman I should learn from my more senior coworkers and NCOs, and to be careful what I said around a certain second lieutenant. Then he told me that his door was always open to me or anyone that needed to talk to him about anything. He specifically told me that he viewed his position as the squadron's only Chief Master Sergeant to that of an (American) Indian Chief, and that although there were some great senior NCOs in the squadron, I should never ever forget that he was THE CHIEF. He showed me his favorite chief's bust (he must have had ten) and his Chief's coin. The bust made a powerful, important impression on me—as has every Chief's bust that I have seen since that day.

The Air Force, in its wisdom, formally trained me in a lot of areas, but oddly, my "How to be a Chief Master Sergeant" training was all OJT, or learning by observing. Fortunately, over the years I had a lot of exposure to many, many outstanding Chiefs. Throughout my career I observed that Chief Master Sergeants, (with a few sorry exceptions), displayed the same devotion to the Air Force that I saw in Chief Kuhns. They seemed to be cut from the same cloth, with similar ideals and principles. Their people always came first. When I was promoted to Chief, I proudly placed my first Chief's bust on my desk, and in doing so I accepted the pay and respect of the rank—and

the leadership responsibilities of the position. The firm mouth and kind eyes on the face of my fellow Chief helped me get started off on the right foot each morning. I cannot say for sure that without an American Indian bust on my desk I would have been less affective as a Chief, but I sincerely believe it to be true. Being a Chief can be a difficult and lonely job. The decisions and interaction of a Chief affect not only him or her, but everyone in—and usually outside of—the chain of command. Your decision making process has to be lot more critical when you get promoted to Chief.

Sadly, there is a determined effort by some to eliminate the connection between the American Indian Chief and the Chief Master Sergeant, insinuating that perhaps we are pretending to be American Indian Chiefs rather than Air Force Chief Master Sergeants. Some say that displaying any image of an American Indian Chief might be offensive to some real American Indians. The most informed and valid criticism I'm aware of is that some Air Force Chiefs got carried away with their memorabilia collections. I have been guilty of that. One of the benefits of being in the Air Force is that you get to live and travel all over the world...and a person collects stuff. Traditionally, whenever a Chief left a unit he or she inevitably was presented mementos that had something to do with an American Indian Chief. Sometimes, through ignorance rather than malice, inappropriate gifts are given. Over the years, my own family gave me Christmas gifts that might be inappropriate. But times have changed, and people can change. Thanks to a lot of rhetoric from many sources, people are more aware that some things associated with American Indians have religious connotations. Through research, education and regulation, certainly the Air Force can establish some boundaries whereby we can retain the long standing and honorable relationship between the American Indian and Air Force Chiefs without stepping over valid religious boundaries (keeping in mind, please, that you can never make everyone happy. Every new Chief quickly finds that out.)

Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Murray published a letter on 15 April 2005 on this subject. In his letter he stated that the reason that Air Force Chiefs originally adopted the image of American Indian Chiefs was to...”capture the virtues of courage, bravery and honor associated with an American Indian Chief”. I somewhat disagree with Chief Murray. During my almost 32 year Air Force career, I came to understand that although courage and bravery are useful chiefly traits, the most important traits that we adopted are compassion and understanding for our people. These, coupled with vast knowledge, and reasoning and influencing skills, brought great respect to the rank, and produced a long line of effective Chiefs.

Chief Murray further stated in his letter that ...“there is no official correlation between the U.S. Air Force rank of Chief Master Sergeant and Native Americans”. Perhaps...but I would argue that the idea was established and has been the underlying guiding principal of the rank for more than forty years. Certainly something that had official support and acknowledgement for that long takes on at least a semblance of being official, and I admit to being baffled by the efforts to do away with something that is the fundamental underpinning of the rank of Chief Master Sergeant.

I see a serious problem with officially disassociating the American Indian Chief with the rank of Chief Master Sergeant, because I believe it will create a serious void in the moral guidance and training of future Chiefs. The Air Force Times decried "Hey Chief, you're no Indian" on its front page! What message does that give? "Stop doing that" insinuates that Chiefs were doing something wrong—and as a headline it was disrespectful to the rank. No one can convince me that having a stoic American Indian Chief greet a comrade each day to guide them in their daily duties is wrong. It's similar to my mother who looked at her statue of Saint Mary every day before she had to deal with her six children. Without the unspoken but powerful influence of the bust and the image on the Chief's coin, I am concerned that future Chiefs will be set adrift—as a boat without a rudder, or an airplane without an empennage—only to satisfy a few people who have not studied the evolution of the rank; who have nothing better to do than to make something out of nothing; who refuse to accept the significance of the position of a Chief; and who should, but in fact do not, possess the virtues of courage and bravery required to deal with this ridiculous effort to identify and expunge anything and everything that could possibly be construed as being politically incorrect.

The ideals, and therefore the visual image, of an American Indian Chief have symbolized the rank of Chief Master Sergeant since shortly after its inception. It should be judged as it was intended—as a symbol of respect and in the highest regard. This symbol should never be discarded, but rather proudly embraced. Promote it, advertise it...embellish it! Understand both its historical and future importance—and after the research and guidelines are established to prevent impropriety, this subject should be closed.

I know that I am not an American Indian, and speaking for myself, I was a little offended by the Air Force Times' assertion that perhaps I thought that I was. What I am, and will always be, is a coin carrying Chief—and on my coin is the image that stood with me for many years—my friend and mentor—an American Indian Chief.