



**MSgt.** Kevin Thomas, the Air National Guard liaison to the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, is in many ways the face of senior non-commissioned officer evolution.

A veteran aerospace ground equipment mechanic, he transitioned to the Air National Guard from Active Duty in the mid-1990s, serving in professional military education assignments, then as a logistics analyst at 1st Air Force before arriving at the Pentagon as the ANG's liaison to the CMSAF in August 2013. He is also the first Air Guardsman to serve in the new billet.

"The idea was to have a liaison in the office that [CMSAF James A. Cody] could reach out to on an immediate basis, that impacted the Air Guard and enlisted airmen," Thomas said of his day-to-day duties. Chief Cody felt "he needed to get representation from Active [Duty], Guard, and Reserve" to help guide deliberations on policies which would affect all corners of the enlisted Total Force. Thomas is now a subject matter expert for senior leaders and is in the middle of some wide-reaching policy changes.

### ONE GOAL, ONE PRODUCT

As such, Thomas has spent a great deal of time in and out of meetings that are in many ways determining how the Total Force will look in the future. He will often liaise with the ANG Readiness Center for personnel discussions surrounding the "three-in-one" initiative—USAF's push to combine as many of the Active Duty, Air Force Reserve, and ANG instructions and regulations into one product. "There are impacts to the Guard in decisions every day," and knowing the impacts of decisions made at the Air Staff level is critical to good AFRC and ANG integration.

Thomas' two-year tour at the Pentagon is an example of how USAF wants to build its senior NCOs into more strategic assets to be utilized across the Total Force.

When Thomas finishes his tour, he will have valuable exposure to the "executive level" of the Air Force, he said, and will have knowledge of how policies are formed and implemented. Upon completion, Thomas anticipates he will return to an Air Guard- or National Guard-centric organization.

"When people are wondering 'what is going on at the Pentagon?' I'll be able to help," he said. "I'll be able to give insight, that this is part of the process, and I'll help build trust between [the Air Guard and USAF leadership]."

Thomas' position is just one of many into which the Air Force wants to put

USAF photo by SrA. Adam Grant





# "THE NEW NCO WAY

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor

**USAF is attempting to improve its NCO development, as it expects more from its enlisted force in the years ahead**

*TSgt. Correy Hodge stands guard at an entry control point at Ellsworth AFB, S.D., during an operational readiness exercise in 2010.*



USAF photo by A1C Gustavo Castillo



USAF photo by SrA. Christina Brownlow

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senior NCOs in the coming years. With its Fiscal 2015 budget being vetted on Capitol Hill, USAF leaders have made the case that another painful round of personnel reductions are needed: an estimated 25,000 cut from the end strength over the next five years to offset rising personnel costs and help pay for modernization and readiness needs.

“While we are going to be smaller, ... how we execute that is going to be hard,” CMSAF Cody said in a March interview. “It’s going to be hard on our airmen and our families. There is a lot of uncertainty right now.”

While USAF is cutting aircraft and equipment, it is also focused on reducing its personnel costs—as are the other services—while retaining the hard-earned experience and talent in an NCO cadre built from years of combat operations. With a large majority of the force in the enlisted ranks, Cody and senior USAF leaders say the service is looking to retain and possibly expand the roles and responsibilities of its most talented NCOs.

This means changes to NCO professional military education, changes to developmental special duty assignments, and—potentially—a rethinking of the appropriate roles for and responsibilities of NCOs serving in billets now held by

company grade officers, according to Cody and Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Mark A. Welsh III.

The USAF force-shaping debate is spurring a broad and deep look at the functions, roles, and development of the noncommissioned officer. As USAF draws down, there is opportunity to get some of these processes ironed out.

“There’s a lot of goodness going on,” Cody emphasized. “We are still very much looking at how we are evolving and developing [the enlisted] force to make sure they have the capabilities and skill sets the nation demands.”

Today, approximately 82 percent of airmen are enlisted, and the service knows any changes to personnel compensation and benefits will have wide-ranging repercussions.

USAF also wants to establish master sergeant promotion boards, in an attempt to help identify high performers earlier in their enlisted careers (senior NCOs go before boards, but moving from tech sergeant to master sergeant does not require a board). Cody and Welsh have said repeatedly they want to see these promotion boards established. The sooner the Air Force can identify its “performers,” they say, the better for the long-term health of the service as it tries to tighten up and survive

the sequester while still retaining as much human capital as possible.

Cody said USAF is looking to execute master sergeant promotion boards “next year, as long as we have the capacity to do so. ... It’s not that we are not promoting the right people today, but the roles and responsibilities [of NCOs] today as opposed to 30 years ago have changed, and so that process should change,” Cody said.

### SOUL SEARCHING

Cody’s office has inherited the drive to improve senior NCO development from his predecessor, former CMSAF James A. Roy, but the issue has only grown in importance as the service is now faced with some deep soul searching about what it expects out of all its airmen in the years ahead. “Do I worry about losing people in all this? Absolutely,” Cody said during a tour of USAF bases in the Pacific last summer with Welsh. “But we have the most capable people we have ever had today. And down to the youngest airmen, they all understand they are a part of what we are going through.” As the force shrinks in the coming years, the argument goes, every individual airman becomes even more important, not just in their particular job or field, but as a leader helping to mold and retain the force, and pass on that experience and perspective to younger airmen.

Cody, a career air traffic controller, said a good number of junior enlisted airmen he’s come across over the years don’t think of themselves as having leadership potential because of the way the enlisted force emphasizes technical skills. It’s the

**[1] SrA. Justin Gordon, an assistant noncommissioned officer in charge [NCOIC] of survival, evasion, resistance, and escape training, completes a static line jump at Spangdahlem AB, Germany. [2] MSgt. Michael Noel (c), the Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs superintendent of force management, performs elevated push-ups with US marines during a senior enlisted professional military education course. [3] TSgt. Tabatha Polson, NCOIC of an immunization clinic, checks through supplies at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.**



goal of USAF leadership to retain the knowledge airmen have built up in the first decade of their careers and pass it on to their fellow airmen.

“People get really good at their job, they like their job, and they’re happy to do that job,” Cody said at last September’s Air & Space Conference.

The Air Force builds the enlisted force this way because of the technical, skill-driven nature of the work of the enlisted force—from life support shops to flight lines to communications squadrons. For the first 10 to 12 years of an enlisted person’s career, an airman will work to master a particular skill set.

“You’re proud to be an airman, but you’re probably just as proud and sometimes more proud to do the job you do and think less about being an airman,” Cody said. USAF wants to take the airmen who might leave the service at the end of an enlistment and convince them that there are greater opportunities in the force.

Therefore, USAF is looking very closely at what it dubs “deliberate development,” or making sure junior NCOs identified as solid performers continue on with the service, and move into leadership roles, joint and international assignments, and eventually senior positions. To accomplish this, the service is retooling how it approaches key leadership billets in the enlisted force, particularly “developmental special duties”—a series of 10 special assignments to include military training instructors, recruiters, USAF Honor Guard, first sergeants, professional military education instructors, career assistance advisors, technical training instructors,

US Air Force Academy trainers, military training leaders, and airman and family readiness center NCOs.

These positions were filled largely on a volunteer basis prior to 2013, Cody noted in March. Now the billets are drawn from nominations at the major command level, from staff sergeants to master sergeants, and these positions are of great influence across the NCO corps. They have been identified as jobs that cultivate “strategic” airmen. From the point of recruitment, through tech training and Airman Leadership School, NCOs will get the chance to directly guide and influence the force before going back into their career fields with added experience. A nomination-based process ensures



these duties are filled and a ready pool of candidates can meet demands.

The growth of senior enlisted leaders in special assignments, fellowship programs, and joint billets has steadily increased as command chiefs and senior leaders see more value in building senior NCOs with broad exposure to many aspects of today’s Air Force.

SMSGt. Melanie Noel, who prior to her arrival in Washington, D.C., served a long career in security forces, personnel, and in basic military training, recently participated in USAF’s Congressional Fellow program in 2013.

“I tried to give perspective on the enlisted population of the Air Force,” she said. “It’s a point of view [staffers] didn’t get often.” Noel noted she served on the House Armed Services Committee during many of the debates surrounding the courts-martial emanating from abuses at JBSA-Lackland, Texas. As a former first sergeant at Lackland, with one stint in BMT and the other in tech school, Noel’s views were valuable to her member’s office.

An airman assigned to the billet does not give official USAF statements (those must come through the legislative liaison) but is in a position to give perspective about how certain aspects of the service work, in addition to learning about the legislative process.

Noel was also the first senior NCO in the Congressional Fellows program. The Air Force decided in 2011 that it wanted to open the opportunity to senior enlisted airmen, an initiative driven by then-CMSAF Roy and expanded under Cody. She cut the program short, however, when she learned she was selected for promotion to



**MSgt. Patrick Noppenberg, an NCOIC of food services at Kandahar AB, Afghanistan, organizes supplies for a kitchen that provides some 1,500 meals per day.**

chief master sergeant, and now is moving into a position in the Air Force's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office on the Air Staff. Another senior NCO, this one with an intelligence background, will follow on in the position soon and more senior NCOs are expected to follow in years ahead.

"I think it was a huge opportunity and is something we need to spend more time and get more folks into," Noel said of her experience. "We've talked a lot about whether we need a highly educated enlisted force, but I think it's absolutely critical for a senior leader. You want someone who, when they sit at the table, at a [combatant command] or at NATO in a senior position, [is] able to speak and be in concert with their boss and represent your background. ... You can only do that if you have the experience and education to go along" with it, she said.

### CONTINUING EDUCATION

In addition to ensuring senior NCOs get to fill special duty assignments, USAF is also retooling how it educates and builds the senior enlisted force. Welsh, speaking in February at the Air Force Association's Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, announced a series of changes in the works for the NCO corps that would hopefully aid airmen in making sure they focus on job performance while also getting the right professional military education.

Welsh said airmen would be required to complete an associate's degree, through the Community College of the Air Force or another institution, and enlisted airmen must attend Airman Leadership School

then the Noncommissioned Officer Academy (for senior NCOs, they will have to attend the Senior NCO Academy for further development). Both the NCOA and the SNCOA are going to transition to a "blended learning" curriculum in the near future, Welsh said, which will shrink the length of the residence course in both schools and will not repeat material covered in the correspondence portion. Welsh said a beta test of the SNCO Academy correspondence course had run, and both academies would be fully operational with the new program by the end of this spring.

"Everything is connected, from recruitment on," Cody said in March, adding that USAF will be "evolving" PME and it will take several years to get right. "We are bringing the level of learning and comprehension to a much higher level," he said, adding that blended learning also allows the service to be "more predictable" in its PME practices.

While Cody views the debate on the roles and responsibilities as a separate one from the "churn" of the budget now unfolding, Welsh has made no secret his interest in exploring what USAF expects of senior NCOs—to include having them assume billets formerly reserved for officers. "What we are doing is ... opening our aperture to have the discussion about where we think the best utilization of our talents, specifically the talents of our enlisted force, should be," Cody said in March.

Especially over the last two decades, the enlisted realm has "evolved to a much different place than when we first estab-

lished their traditional roles," Cody said. He singled out the 618th Tanker Airlift Control Center at Scott AFB, Ill., as one organization that has already taken some roles formerly performed by officers and placed them under the charge of senior NCOs. While there is no one effort or study looking at these issues, Cody said, the Air Force is having a "broad discussion" about many different mission areas.

"Where it makes sense, we should have a discussion about it," he said. "When you have the right training, education, experience within an enlisted person, why would we not leverage that in roles [that], in history ... were predominantly performed by officers. I think we're at a juncture where [Welsh] would like us to think about it again."

Of course, this debate is also not entirely separated from cost, as Welsh himself admits. "If we can get well-qualified mid- to senior-grade NCOs doing jobs that [company grade officers] are now performing, over the life cycle, the cost of those people is less money. And they are very capable people now," Welsh said during a stop in Japan last August.

As the service takes a hard look at who it wants to stay in the force in the coming years, it needs to think hard about how it utilizes its NCO force, he added.

"They are better educated, they are very capable, ... and we have an awful lot of situations where we have a mid-level officer who will go to a senior NCO to make sure a decision they are about to make is practical, credible ... and then they come back and make that decision. Well, I'm not convinced that senior NCO could not make that same decision," he said. ■