

CMSAF McKinley, graduating Airmen honor enlisted heroes

by Mike Joseph
37 Training Wing Public Affairs

1/2/2009 - **LACKLAND AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** - Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Rodney McKinley and more than 700 Airmen preparing to graduate from basic military training honored the Air Force's enlisted heroes during today's dedication of the new Enlisted Heroes Walk here.

Several dignitaries, including Gen. Stephen R. Lorenz, commander of the Air Education and Training Command, 2nd Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. Alfred K. Flowers, and 37th Training Wing Commander Brig. Gen. Len Patrick attended the dedication ceremony. Also in attendance was the fifth chief master sergeant of the Air Force, retired Chief Master Sgt. Robert Gaylor, who was the ranking Air Force enlisted servicemember from Aug. 1, 1977 to his retirement Sept. 1, 1979.

The event took place just prior to the graduation of 726 Airmen from basic training. They are the first to complete the Air Force's extended 8.5-week BMT program. The Airmen are also the first to participate in the new Air Force tradition of marching over the Enlisted Heroes Walk with its 164 engraved stones during the BMT graduation ceremony.

Chief McKinley, guest speaker and the Air Force's highest-ranking enlisted servicemember, helped conceive the idea as a way for Airmen to remember and honor enlisted heroes who served before them. He proposed the concept during an earlier visit here and approved the current design and location of the memorial near the parade grounds.

"We dedicate this Enlisted Heroes Walk to honor our enlisted heroes who have given so much, who still inspire us today, and who will continue to inspire every Airman who will march over this hallowed ground from this day forward," Chief McKinley said during his remarks at the ceremony. "In the 500 steps it takes to complete the bomb run, lives will change and dreams will be realized. Airmen will be born."

An Air Force veteran with almost 30 years of service, Chief McKinley cited the memorial dedication as one of his career highlights.

"My proudest moment occurred Oct. 14, 2006, when we dedicated our Air Force Memorial to the more than 55,000 Airmen who have laid down their lives for our country," he said. "Today marks my second proudest day."

Calling Lackland the enlisted gateway to the Air Force, Chief McKinley said it was fitting the parade field was chosen as the final location for the Enlisted Heroes Walk.

"The walk has significant meaning for graduating Airmen," said Chief Master Sgt. Nancy Judge, the 737th Training Group's chief of standardization and evaluation, who, together with Chief Master Sgt. Stephen Colbert, now deployed, oversaw construction.

"Many have dedicated their lives so we can be where we are today. Those who walk over this symbolic memorial will reflect on the significance of our enlisted heritage and realize there are heroes among us," said Chief Judge.



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This plaque, on display near the parade field at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, was unveiled during the Jan. 2 dedication ceremony of the new Enlisted Heroes Walk. (U.S. Air Force Photo/Alan Boedeker)

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The Enlisted Heroes Walk will also serve to educate Airmen on enlisted contributions to the security of the United States and inspire Airmen to serve with courage and honor, motivating Airmen to be heroes for our nation, she said.

The Airmen whose names appear etched in stone attained the highest honors for heroism and unselfish acts while serving in armed conflict including present day operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Six Medal of Honor recipients, 23 Air Force Cross recipients and 135 Silver Star recipients spanning operations in World War II, Vietnam, Somalia and the Middle East are also memorialized.

Also in attendance was retired major Thomas A. Newman, a special guest whose name appears as one of the first 164 memorialized in the walk. As a sergeant in 1968, Mr. Newman received the Air Force Cross for heroism in Vietnam.

The names of other enlisted heroes predating 1965 will be added later because no databases are available to confirm the information. The research can only be done manually and must be verified.

Construction on the project began in January 2008 with much of the credit going to civil engineer Benjamin Dela Cruz and Tracy English, the wing historian who conducted the initial research for the project.

The 32-by-32 foot design holds 1,024 bricks, which are tan with black lettering. The edges of the walk are red to match existing pavers on the parade field bomb run.

"The Airmen who attend BMT have answered our nation's call," said Chief McKinley. "Graduation day is a very special day for them, their families and our Air Force. This is a day they will never forget. It is now even more special."

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