

SIMPLY OUTSTANDING

By Susan M. Rubel

Over the years, Outstanding Airmen of the Year have met a President, distinguished themselves in combat, and gone on to great things in the Air Force.

Air Force Magazine features the new class of Outstanding Airmen of the Year in its September issue each year. See the September 2015 edition for more on this year's OAY class. For the list of all Outstanding Airmen, visit www.afa.org/oayh.



The Air Force Association was just 10 years old in 1956 when then-Executive Director James H. Straubel conceived the idea of selecting a group of deserving enlisted airmen to represent the Air Force's major commands and operating agencies at AFA's national convention.

The goal was to recognize these enlisted personnel for their exceptional leadership, superior job performance, extensive community involvement, and personal achievements. Straubel thought doing this would help convey to Congress and others the need for a well-educated and adequately compensated enlisted force.

He asked John O. Gray, then the Air Force's convention project officer, to pursue the idea. Soon, wire dispatches were flowing into Air Force headquarters from the commands and agencies with recommendations on who would best represent them. The Air

Force settled on 19 airmen: 17 master sergeants and two technical sergeants.

AFA and the Air Force honored these airmen in August of that year at its con-

“It is a privilege for our association to honor the very best of our enlisted force each year. ... I'm humbled every time I meet them and see how much they have all done in such a short time.”

—Scott Van Cleef, AFA Chairman of the Board

vention in New Orleans. They sat at the head table next to general officers and other VIPs at the convention's airpower symposium luncheon for the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Nathan F. Twining, who led a standing ovation for them.

What was meant to be a one-time event was so well-received that AFA and Air Force leaders decided to continue the process each year.

Now in its 59th year, the Outstanding Airmen of the Year program has become a major part of AFA's annual conference (before 2003, it was a part of the annual convention*) and has blossomed into a full week of activities, with AFA staff and volunteers hosting the OAY and their spouses on a whirlwind series of touring,

* Since the advent of the OAY program, there have been two years when AFA did not hold its national convention and honor the Outstanding Airmen there:

1965 and 2001. The convention did not take place in 1965 due to an 18-month gap caused when AFA changed the convention schedule from the summer to spring. The association canceled its 2001 convention following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C.

2015 OUTSTANDING AIRMEN

SMSGt. Harold J. Terrance Jr.
MSGt. Joseph Y. Bogdan
MSGt. Timothy A. Mason
TSgt. Tamara R. Acfalle
SSgt. Lindsey H. Fuentes
SSgt. Travis R. Jordan
SSgt. Kurtis V. Harrison
SSgt. Douglas P. Kechijian
SrA. Allen R. Cherry III
SrA. Kresston L. Davis
SrA. Meaghan G. Holley
SrA. Mason S. Meherg

FAMILY AFFAIR

One husband and wife share the distinction of being the sole married couple among the Outstanding Airmen of the Year. Then-MSGt. Thomas C. Voegtle won the honor in 1988, representing Air Force Space Command. Five years later, the Air Force selected his wife, then-MSGt. Trenda L. Voegtle, who represented Air Combat Command.

entertainment, and VIP treatment. The Outstanding Airmen dinner is a VIP affair attended by the Air Force Secretary, Chief of Staff, and dozens of general officers and industry executives.

Two groups of OAY had the opportunity to meet President Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office, in 1984 and 1987.

Including the 2015 class, which AFA and the Air Force will honor later this month at the association's Air & Space Conference in National Harbor, Md., there have been more than 800 airmen, including highly decorated ones (see OAY Valor box), who have received this prestigious honor. SSgt. Mary Clarke, in 1957, became the first female OAY.

"I consider being selected as one of the 12 Outstanding Airmen for 1974 a very important highlight in my Air Force career," said retired CMSAF James M. McCoy, one of two OAY who went on to become the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. CMSAF Donald L. Harlow was the other.

After his OAY selection, McCoy went on to become Strategic Air Command's first-ever senior enlisted advisor. Then in 1979, he advanced to be the sixth Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force. His work for the Air Force didn't end there.

"I am convinced that this honor provided me the opportunity to become active in AFA," said McCoy. "After my retirement in 1981, I became involved with AFA at the chapter, state, and regional level, culminating in becoming the National President and Chairman of the Board from the period 1992 to 1996."

Since his selection in 1974, McCoy said he has been able to attend "almost every OAY dinner and help recognize our truly outstanding enlisted performers." AFA, he said, "has much to be proud of for recognizing our enlisted men and women."

By the early 1960s, the OAY program had grown to recognize more than 20 Outstanding Airmen per year, peaking in 1969 when the Air Force selected 24. However, supporting this number of airmen had become increasingly expensive, prompting AFA leadership to recommend reducing the number to 10 per year, based on the Junior Chamber of Commerce's 10 Outstanding Young Men of the Year program.

The Air Force initially agreed to this, but then—the story goes—an Air Force project officer, who had become enthralled with the movie "The Dirty



“The 12 airmen we select every year are but a small sampling of the many things our enlisted men and women do every day to protect the homeland and secure our interests around the globe. ... Our technology may make us faster, sleeker, and more advanced than ever before, but technology will never be able to replace the hearts of airmen.”

—CMSAF James Cody to *Wingman Magazine*

Dozen” from several years earlier, pushed to have 12 OAY each year, an idea that ultimately won out.

Thus, starting in 1970, AFA and the Air Force limited the number of airmen selected each year to 12, a group that became known as The Golden Dozen. Until the early 1980s, most of the Outstanding Airmen selected each year held more senior ranks.

From 1958 through 1975, IBM was the sole corporate sponsor of the OAY program. The company initiated the policy of having spouses join the honorees. IBM paid for the spouse travel and their formal attire for the Outstanding Airmen banquet and entertained the OAY and their spouses at AFA’s convention. IBM staff were also responsible for establishing the annual Outstanding Airmen dinner, with attendance, until 1979, on an invitation-only basis.

In 1976, new Defense Department policy precluded sponsorship of large programs by a single defense contractor, so IBM’s role ended. As a result, AFA invited corporate partners to sponsor the Outstanding Airmen program by purchasing tables at the dinner. This corporate support has continued since.

The OAY dinner did not take place until 1962, during the annual convention

in Las Vegas. Entertainment became part of the dinner in 1970 when the national convention returned to Washington, D.C. The USAir Force Band has provided the entertainment, for the most part.

Also starting in 1970, the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force began serving as the dinner’s master of ceremonies. Prior to that, masters of ceremonies included cartoonist Milton Caniff, journalist Robert Considine, and astronaut Joseph H. Engle.

Today, enlisted personnel nominated by their major command, field operating agency, or direct reporting unit receive the Outstanding Airmen of the Year ribbon, the Air Force’s highest annual award recognition. They compete to be one of the 12 OAY in one of three categories: airman, noncommissioned officer, and senior noncommissioned officer.

The Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, a general officer, and command chiefs from some of the major commands constitute the final selection board. The Air Force Chief of Staff reviews the nominees.

OAY nominations are based on the airman’s performance. The criteria are “unique, unusual, or outstanding individual involvement and achievement within the preceding 12 months.”

RIBBONS AND BADGES



Outstanding Airmen of the Year ribbon with bronze star worn by the selected 12 OAY.



Outstanding Airmen of the Year ribbon worn by all those nominated by majcoms, FOAs, and DRUs to HQ.



Outstanding Airmen Badge worn by the 12 OAY for one year.

Top: 1968-2008
Bottom: Current Badge

OAY VALOR

Three Outstanding Airmen of the Year have received the Air Force's second highest award for valor, the Air Force Cross: Sgt. Duane D. Hackney, an OAY in 1968 who retired as a chief master sergeant; TSgt. Timothy A. Wilkinson (1994), who retired as a master

sergeant; and SSgt. Robert Gutierrez (2010).

Five OAY are Silver Star recipients: MSgt. Scott C. Fales, a 1993 OAY; TSgt. Bradley T. Reilly (2006); SSgt. Earl I. Covell, 2008; MSgt. Delorean M. Sheridan (2014); and TSgt. Douglas J. Matthews, 2014.

Nominees must pass a certain level of scrutiny since they are expected to be the best representatives of the Air Force's enlisted force.

An airman chosen as one of the 12 OAY wears the ribbon with a bronze star and wears the Outstanding Airman badge for one year. Each Outstanding Airman also serves the following year on the Air Force Association's Enlisted Council (originally called the Airmen Council).

At the urging of the OAY, AFA stood up the Airmen Council in 1964 and, in 1977, adopted a policy whereby the 12 OAY would automatically become members of the council, managed by the Air Force.

The OAY program has been in luck with capable and enthusiastic volunteers. Retired CMSgt. Charles "Chuck" Lucas and his wife, Mary, for years hosted the Outstanding Airmen suite at the convention hotel. Lucas had been assigned to work

with the program in the late 1960s while serving in West Germany with US Air Forces in Europe. The couple also escorted the airmen on their tours of Washington, D.C., including visits to the White House, museums, and theaters. They continued in this role up until 2000.

Gwilym D. Hughes, a professional Air Force photographer, started working with the OAY program in 1974. He donated his time and energies to document the activities of each year's class, including during the convention and while touring. He created photo albums and videos that he sent to each airman—a valuable and cherished memento for all of them. Larry McTighe took over this role in 1996.

From the early 1960s to 1997, Richmond M. "Max" Keeney, AFA's director of membership operations, was the staff executive in charge of the OAY program. I assisted Keeney, and then took over the

OAY HITS HOLLYWOOD

Two OAY recipients got decorated for bravery under fire in the mid-90s for a harrowing experience in Somalia. Check out that story at bit.ly/HeroesAtMogadishu. It would eventually inspire the 2001 movie "Black Hawk Down."

program for a decade until 2008 when Lynette Cross assumed responsibility. Jill C. Westeyn has managed the program since 2014, following Cross' retirement.

OAY have represented the Air Force and this nation well. AFA was proud to create the OAY program and we're privileged to continue honoring these exceptional airmen. We congratulate the 2015 Outstanding Airmen of the Year and all those who came before them! ✪

Susan M. Rubel is AFA's senior director for insurance and member benefits. She thanks the late John O. Gray, former AFA executive director, for his historical documentation of the OAY program, and the late James H. Straubel, also a former AFA executive director, for the OAY coverage in his book, Crusade for Airpower: The Story of the Air Force Association.

REPEAT PERFORMERS

Four airmen have won Outstanding Airmen of the Year honors twice before the Air Force changed the policy to allow only first-time airmen. George Morar became an Outstanding Airman in 1957 as a master sergeant representing US Air Forces in Europe. Seven years later, he was chosen again as a senior master sergeant representing Military Air Transport Service.

The Air Force recognized Harold F. Renneberg for the first time in 1961 when he was a master sergeant representing Caribbean Air Command. He received

OAY honors the second time in 1966 as a senior master sergeant representing the Air Force Accounting and Finance Center.

Selected the first time in 1966 as a master sergeant representing Air Force Systems Command, John R. Schumann received the honor the second time just two years later as senior master sergeant with the same organization.

Freddie J. Walton, chosen for the first time in 1969 as a senior master sergeant representing Air Training Command, repeated the accomplishment the following year as a chief master sergeant representing Aerospace Defense Command.