

## Active Duty Airmen, Where are you?

- SMSgt (ret) Gary Swanson, Chapter Legislative Trustee



*At 50 years of age, our association is at a crossroads. We have been a part of many great successes over the years and perhaps those successes are leading to what I see as severe apathy in the ranks. Our International Vice President, CMSgt (ret) Tim Litherland just passed the word that out of 263,000 enlisted members currently serving in the US Air Force only 37,000 are members of the Air Force Sergeants Association, a mere 14% of the entire active duty enlisted force. I have to wonder why the active duty force has such apathy for this organization, one that has stood up for them for 50 years to improve the quality of life for the enlisted Airman. Maybe the 220,000 plus Airmen that aren't members are perfectly satisfied with the benefits they currently enjoy on active duty. I'll fully admit that pay and benefits are pretty nice in this day and age. We have 100% tuition assistance, a great GI Bill that allows us to transfer that entitlement to our dependents, our Airmen live in the best dorms the Air Force has ever had, we can retire after 20 years of service with 50% of our High-3 pay, and we get a pretty good medical package when we retire from the service. Honestly, it is tough to find anything to really complain about with our current benefits and things have been pretty sweet for the last decade.*

*This wasn't always the case, the care and feeding of our Airmen has come a long way in the last 40 years. When I was an Airman Basic in the early 80s I made \$200/pay period and this was after a 25% pay raise through the 1981-1982 fiscal years. Do you know who was at the forefront fighting for that pay raise? The Air Force Sergeants Association was there for you. Over the last 15-20 years AFSA has fought for pay increases that have netted a 20% higher monthly pay than what the DoD recommended to Congress in the annual budget. Reduce your monthly pay by 20% and see how that would affect your family's quality of life. Be thankful that AFSA and other military organizations have been there to fight for you.*

*While things are pretty nice right now, we have to be vigilant during this time of financial hardship our country is facing. Many of the benefits we enjoy can be gone with one stroke of the pen. A great example of this is what Congress tried to do in 1995 to military members who were on active duty and fell under the "Final Pay" retirement system. To save money on future retirement costs, Congress worked very hard to push through a change from the "Final Pay" computation to one that would average out a member's final 12 pay checks and base their retirement pay on that number. Had this passed, this would have cost the average retiree about 3% of their retirement pay each month.*

*The current retirement system is getting a strong look along with many other benefits. Don't be naive to think that you will be grandfathered in if there are changes to the current system. In 1995 Congress was not going to grandfather anyone, they were going to break a promise made to these individuals when they enlisted. Our country is in a much tougher financial situation than we ever were in 1995 and AFSA is going to be there to make sure Congress knows what is important.*

*The problem is when only 14% of the active duty force is a member of the association; Congress isn't going to readily lend an ear to hear what we have to say. In effect, you are telling Congress that you don't care what they do with your benefits. The time to be vigilant is now, the time to be a member of AFSA is now, not after we lose critical quality of life benefits that may never be regained.*

*In closing, I ask you to please think about becoming a member and don't assume that any changes to our current benefit structure will include a grandfather clause. Do you feel comfortable gambling with receiving a retirement at around age 40 or are you willing to wait until you turn age 62 to start receiving your retired pay? Congress tried to pull the rug out from under the feet of our service members once before, do you trust them not to try it again?*

-Gary Swanson, SMSgt (ret)