

HE BUILT A FIREFIGHTING FORCE FROM SCRATCH. THE JOB CALLED FOR STAFF-LEVEL PERFORMANCE.

NO CHIEF WAS A SENIOR

HE was the only airman there serving in a staff-level capacity. He was hand-picked by the Seventh Air Force Director of Civil Engineering to supervise nearly 600 Air Force firefighters and crash rescue technicians throughout South Vietnam.

SMSgt. Earl L. Walsh filled the staff position of Chief, Fire Protection Branch, Headquarters Seventh Air Force, for 12 months. He left Tan Son Nhut Air Base in March wearing the Bronze Star for outstanding accomplishments.

Sergeant Walsh took over his job at the height of the buildup of forces in the Republic of Vietnam. One of his first tasks was to compile an up-to-date list of every man assigned to every firefighting or crash rescue unit. This important roster also included information on each man's experience.

Sergeant Walsh learned almost immediately that Seventh Air Force fire protection units had equipment problems. In some cases, he discovered that fire trucks and other items had been delivered to the wrong bases. Some units had overages, others had shortages. Master list in hand, Sergeant Walsh took quick steps to get the firefighting equipment in its proper place.

Some fire departments had no buildings. Some had no quarters. Others had damaged or inoperative equipment. Everybody had problems. So Sergeant Walsh initiated a quarterly fire chiefs conference to pool resources and ideas. And he spent a great deal of time on TDY giving personal, on-the-spot assistance.

A self-help program was started at each installation. At some bases the firefighters built their stations and quarters from the ground up. At other bases they improved existing facilities. With technical assistance from already overworked civil engineering personnel, they took up trowels, hammers, saws and T-squares and put their fire houses in order. The work was sandwiched in between the firefighting duties.

(During one recent six-month period firefighting and crash rescue units in South Vietnam responded to 42,570 calls. Of these, 4,552 were aircraft emergencies.)

Sergeant Walsh soon had things humming throughout the command. A fire protection competition was started, with quarterly awards going to the most improved

fire departments. Cam Ranh Bay Air Base firefighters won the first award.

"Things began improving rapidly," Sergeant Walsh said. "It got to the point where we found it more and more difficult to pick a most improved department."

An ambitious training program was also initiated, requiring a minimum of four hours' training daily for all firefighters. Base-wide inspection programs were started, too, as fire department personnel began searching for potential fire hazards in quarters, shops and offices at every air base.

With the increased training, improved facilities and quarters, and the constantly rising number of calls for assistance, Vietnam-based airmen in the firefighting business found themselves extremely busy. Their morale took a sharp turn upward, according to Lt. Col. C. V. Eld, a member of the Seventh Air Force Civil Engineering staff.

The firefighters increased their cooperation with Vietnamese civilian and military fire departments. They responded to numerous off-base calls to help fight fires or floods. In April 1966 Sergeant Walsh started a program to exchange technical information with Vietnamese Air Force firefighting personnel.

MSgt. William J. Bell, a veteran firefighter on his third tour in Vietnam, was picked to supervise a 10-week instruction program for VNAF firemen. (The first Air Force firefighter to arrive in Vietnam, Sergeant Bell helped establish VNAF fire departments and—in their native tongue—taught the Vietnamese firefighting techniques.)

Twenty-four hours a day, throughout Vietnam, Air Force firefighters are ready to respond to the alarms that send them into action.

"This is a unique organization," Sergeant Walsh said, "since we are an all-blue-suit firefighting team." Most Stateside bases have a mixture of Air Force and civilian firefighters. "The all-airman units in Vietnam have been among the finest I've ever worked with," the Sergeant said with pride.

Sergeant Walsh left Tan Son Nhut Air Base in March for Castle AFB, Calif.

Referring to Sergeant Walsh's work, Maj. Donald E. Coy, a member of the Civil Engineering staff at Seventh Air Force, said Walsh "started practically from scratch a year ago and built Seventh's fire protection branch into one of the most proficient I've ever seen."

The citation which accompanied Sergeant Walsh's Bronze Star medal cited his outstanding accomplishments and the success of his untiring efforts in the field of fire protection throughout South Vietnam.

It isn't likely that Seventh Air Force firefighting personnel will soon forget the chief who was a senior.