



# **A LIFE OF SERVICE | Chief Master Sergeant O'Connor Concludes 39-Year Career with Final Deployment in Germany**



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## GERMANY

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Story by Tech. Sgt. Timothy Hayden 

406th Air Expeditionary Wing 

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RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany – The average age of a U.S. service member is just 28 years old. Chief Master Sgt. Patrick O’Connor has been in uniform longer than most of today’s military has been alive.

After nearly four decades of continuous service—first as a combat engineer in the U.S. Army and later as an explosive ordnance disposal technician in the Air Force Reserve—O’Connor is now completing his final deployment as a senior enlisted leader with the 406th Air Expeditionary Wing in Germany.

Though his time in uniform nears its end, his example of leadership, mentorship and quiet professionalism will carry forward.

“The most important choice a leader makes is the choice to serve, and Chief’s 39 years of service is a testament to that,” said Lt. Col. Justin Krowicki, 406th AEW director of operations and plans. “I’ve had the privilege of serving with Chief at various stages of my career—first as an EOD technician during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and now again as a lieutenant colonel. Throughout it all, he has been someone I’ve sought out for guidance and mentorship.”

O’Connor enlisted in 1986, inspired by a family legacy of service. His father served during the Korean War and his uncle in the Air Force, while his grandmother kept their framed portraits—one in black and white, one in color—on the wall.

His first assignment was as a combat engineer, MOS 12B, with the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, New York. Trained to lay minefields, breach obstacles and build bridges, he quickly gained firsthand experience supporting infantry units in challenging conditions.

“The demolition work was incredible,” he said. “But we were constantly in the field supporting infantry units—especially with our M60 machine guns. It was tough. Still, I learned what it meant to be part of a team that enabled movement and momentum in combat.”

Later, he cross-trained into the 12F tracked vehicle crewman role, where he operated specialized tanks such as the Armored Vehicle-Launched Bridge—a turretless, 60-foot bridge-launching platform designed to support maneuver operations on the battlefield.

After completing his active-duty Army enlistment in July 1990, O’Connor returned home to New Jersey—but just days later, he was recalled as a reservist in support of Operation Desert Storm. Assigned to a training battalion at Fort Dix, he prepared soldiers for deployment but found the work unfulfilling.

“I didn’t get much satisfaction from it,” he said. “I actually tried to switch services again—the Marines and Navy weren’t taking prior-service at the time. But a former infantry officer told me the Air Force Reserve was looking for EOD techs. That conversation changed everything.”

O'Connor officially joined the Air Force Reserve in April 1996 and retrained into the explosive ordnance disposal career field.

He recalled an earlier encounter with an EOD technician during his time at Fort Drum, when a dud-fired round needed to be safely detonated.

"He showed up in shorts and a sweatshirt—no uniform—and told me I wasn't cool enough to blow it up myself," said O'Connor. "He said I had to go to EOD school. So I did."

That moment set the course for the rest of his military service. Over the next two decades, O'Connor deployed multiple times, led critical response missions and mentored junior Airmen through one of the most technically demanding and dangerous specialties in the Air Force.

"My progression was built on doing my job well, every time," he said. "In both services, that's what got me ahead—that and education."

O'Connor earned an associate degree from the Community College of the Air Force, followed by a bachelor's degree, all while continuing to serve. Along the way, he completed rigorous training, developed his leadership skills and steadily rose through the enlisted ranks.

He credits much of his growth to the mentors who helped guide him. In the Army, it was Staff Sgt. Jimmy Clavin, who he said kept him on track. In the Air Force, it was Senior Master Sgt. Barry Smith, who encouraged him through EOD school and taught him how to approach complex scenarios.

He also drew motivation from being overlooked for opportunities in the Army due to his career field. Despite being selected for and excelling in pre-Ranger School courses, he was not eligible to attend the actual course because he was not infantry. After Desert Storm, he went on to graduate from the Army's Sapper Leader Course—a demanding school for combat engineers.

"Like the Air Force, the Army had its own culture," he said. "Sometimes you had to work twice as hard to get half the recognition, but you kept going. You learned to lead by example."

Today, as he finishes his final deployment, O'Connor applies those same lessons in his role as a senior enlisted leader.

"This is a profession—not just a job," he said. "It's a calling. You don't have to be the loudest voice in the room, just the most dependable. The Air Force is a meritocracy—if you apply yourself, the system works."

According to Krowicki, that example is still visible every day.

"Chief is at a point in his career where he could easily phone it in, but he doesn't," Krowicki said. "He's still one of the first in and last out. Most nights, I see him out running more than 10 miles to set an example for the Airmen under him. You don't often get the chance to serve with someone who brings that level of experience and commitment—and still raises his hand to deploy. It's a privilege to serve alongside him overseas."

Outside of uniform, O'Connor works as a physical scientist with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate in Atlantic City, New Jersey. There, he leads a team developing and testing advanced explosive detection systems used in airport screening and other transportation environments. His work involves supporting live explosive testing on retired aircraft to refine detection thresholds and improve public safety—a role that blends his military experience with his scientific training.

O'Connor is married with two sons—one a recent college graduate and the other entering his junior year. Though he has not finalized post-retirement plans, he is considering a shift to private industry or teaching at the college level.

With 39 years of continuous military service behind him, O'Connor offered a final message to the next generation of Airmen.

"Life isn't fair, and it's not easy," he said. "But a positive mental attitude and a strong wingman can take you far. Don't walk alone—you don't need to."

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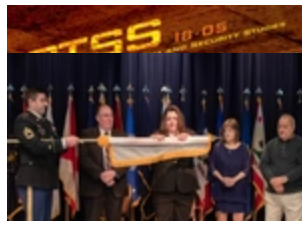
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