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WASHINGTON (Jan. 22, 2015) -- "When we have to go talk to Congress ... there are many times they would much rather hear it from a sergeant major than from a general officer," Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Ray Odierno said.

In his position, Odierno has testified many times on Capitol Hill, and says that lawmakers often want to hear the Army's story through the words of a sergeant major because "they know they have sacrificed and gone through what it takes to be Soldiers."

One such enlisted Soldier is Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III, who will retire from the Army, Jan. 30. Odierno and other senior Army leaders gathered at the Pentagon, Jan. 22, to celebrate Chandler's 33-year career.

"The position of the sergeant major of the Army is incredibly important," Odierno said. "And Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III has done an incredible job of handling that during some, I would argue, pretty challenging times."

Chandler began serving as the 14th sergeant major of the Army in March 2011. At the time, he was sworn in under then Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr. During his time as the senior enlisted advisor, he helped find solutions for an array of daunting challenges.

One of those challenges involved the elimination of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" law that prohibited gay Service members from revealing their sexual orientation.

"Everybody was concerned about how the force would take this," Odierno said. "But the sergeant majors had prepared the force, and we had gone through a fairly significant educational process that this

was going to happen. The transition of this policy probably went smoother than anybody expected. And the reason that happened is because of the non-commissioned officer corps."

Odierno said that the success of such a policy change hinges on the acceptance of it by the non-commissioned officer corps.

"I am convinced if you want to get anything done in our organization, you first have to get the buy-in of our NCOs," he said. "If they buy in, it will happen. And that starts from the top. SMA Chandler was absolutely going to make sure that this policy change was implemented correctly, professionally and ethically."

Another significant contribution during his four-year tenure was to change the way senior enlisted personnel were assigned to jobs, a task Odierno said had been initiated by the 13th Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston.

"SMA Preston started down this road, but SMA Chandler took it and developed it to the next level," Odierno said. "And I have seen the fruits of that as I have traveled around the Army, as I see the right senior sergeants major in the right jobs, spread across the Army and spreading their expertise to places where they would have never served before under our old system."

Odierno said in the past, he had come to think of sergeants major as a kind of "good old boys society."

"They got picked for positions based on how well they knew the senior sergeant major on the installation," he said.

Now, Odierno said, he sees general officers impressed with the right senior NCOs in the right jobs, performing at the top of their game.

"It's the system he put in place. It's made our Army better. And sergeant major, I want to thank you for that," Odierno said.

Chandler was on board during a time when the Army was asked to downsize by 60,000 Soldiers, Odierno said. The Army is now downsizing by an additional 20,000, he said, and may be asked to downsize by as many as 50,000 more.

Odierno said Chandler "set the tone" for how the Army would get to a lower end strength, by developing a system designed to determine who deserved to stay, and by "making sure that he carries

that message, that if you do your job and if you are a good Soldier and a good NCO, there is room for you in this Army."

Chandler also contributed to developing the new Army Operating Concept -- the Soldier 2020 concept, which involves "the future of our NCO corps, and how to train and develop them;" programs to curb and eliminate sexual assault in the Army; and developing the systems needed to bring women into combat arms.

"Just one or two of those issues would have been a complex issue for any SMA," Odierno said. "He has helped lead our Army through that, and our Army is stronger and better today because of his great leadership."

Odierno also highlighted the contributions of Chandler's wife, Jeanne. As the wife of the SMA, she frequently traveled with her husband to military installations to meet with the families of Soldiers.

"She has done so many things to make us aware and help our young families around the Army, as we ask them to conduct many missions around the world," Odierno said. "She has been instrumental in providing feedback, or counsel, or just listening in some cases to them. Thank you for what you have done ... and we appreciate your sacrifice and your support of your husband and all that you have done to make sure that he can do his job, and the sacrifices that you have made to allow him to do his job."

MYTH DISPELLED

"I used to think of the Pentagon as an evil empire," said Chandler, speaking of his time before coming to Washington, D.C., to serve as the Army's senior enlisted member.

Chandler cited situations where, in his previous jobs in the Army, he had come to the Pentagon to ask for something and never got what he had asked for. "It was a place where everything went and never came back," he said.

But on arrival in Washington, D.C., in March 2011, he said, he had a change of heart.

"When I became the SMA, I learned quickly it was not the evil empire," Chandler said. "It was people very dedicated to what the needs of the Army were, and finding a way to make it happen. I learned there are great processes and procedures, like any other bureaucracy. But the difference was they were very dedicated people who were very interested in trying to make a difference."

A FAMILY MISSION

Chandler said being close to his wife, Jeanne Chandler, was important to him, and that he felt that serving as SMA would not allow that to happen. He said he had seen that his predecessor, Preston, had traveled often and always alone. Bearing that in mind, he had said he didn't want to be the SMA.

"I can't do this. I can't even compete," said Chandler of how he had felt back when he was asked to do the job. "If you're not committed 100 percent, then you are doing a disservice not only to the position but also to the Soldiers you are serving."

But conversations with Preston changed his mind. He said Preston told him that it would be possible to travel together with a spouse; that his wife could be with him on his tours.

Chandler thanked the secretary of the Army and the chief of staff for allowing that to happen -- for making it possible for him to be both a good partner to his wife and a good servant of the Army.

With Jeanne at his side, Chandler said he was able to tackle the issues that needed his attention, while Jeanne was able to champion the needs of burdened, overtaxed Army families across the force.

"When Ray became the SMA, I gained the ability to travel with him and do sensing groups with our junior leaders, senior leaders, survivors, schools, day care centers and housing directors," said Jeanne Chandler.

"More than that, I reported back, just like Ray did, to the secretary of the Army and the chief of staff," she added. "And sitting on the Department of Defense Family Readiness Council as an Army representative, I could speak with authority about what was going on with our families, and this council made recommendations to Congress. It was the opportunity of a lifetime."

"I can't tell you the difference she made," Chandler said. "I am not sure I'd be able to measure that. I do know she brought a voice to the Army senior leadership of Soldiers and families, and she gave up a lot to do that."

"I love you for that," he told her.

TODAY'S SOLDIER

On leaving the Army now, Chandler reflected on what the Army looked like to him, in the past -- back

in 1981 -- and how it has changed today.

"It's so much better than it was when I first entered the Army," Chandler said. "When I came in the Army it was really at the end of the Vietnam era, and the beginning of the all-volunteer force. We had huge challenges then."

On the first day at his first duty station, for instance, Chandler said a Soldier had jumped out of a window with a heroin needle in his arm.

"The CQs [Charge of Quarters] walked around with loaded pistols to ensure that the barracks were a safe and secure environment," Chandler said. "There were race issues. Our equipment was falling apart."

Today, Chandler said, things are different -- not just with equipment and with conduct, but with education as well.

"It's so much better now with the standardization of education across the Army," he said. "If you see a sergeant, you know what that sergeant has gotten for school. That's so much different than years ago. And I'm glad to have been a part of it."

Chandler enlisted in 1981, and trained as a 19E armor crewman. He was sworn in as the 14th Sgt. Maj. of the Army on March 1, 2011. He will retire Jan. 30, after more than 33 years of service, and will be replaced by Sgt. Maj. Daniel A. Dailey, who, until recently, served as the senior enlisted adviser for U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.