

SGM Randal Day
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History of the NCO

**Significant Contributions of Former Sergeants Major of the Army to
the Noncommissioned Officer Corps**

Outline

Significant Contributions of Former Sergeants Major of the Army to the NCO Corps

- I. The topic areas of reference are the NCO Education System (NCOES), uniform policies, training, and NCO position structure.
- II. Former Sergeants Major of the Army

William O. Woolridge

George W. Dunaway

William G. Baingridge

All other former SMAs

The position of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) has been filled thirteen times by outstanding Soldiers. Before appointment to this position, individuals will have already demonstrated several years of leadership ability and exceptional dedication to the welfare of Soldiers. The SMA does not make policies himself, but he is strategically placed next to the Chief of Staff of the Army as the top advisor on all enlisted matters. The men who have served as SMAs have made significant contributions to the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps, not only while serving in that position, but also throughout their careers leading up to that point. It is difficult to attribute individual credit as accomplishments or contributions were born with one SMA and came to fruition with another. Other accomplishments or contributions were born or thought of by Army staff and the SMA pushed forward to make them happen. This paper will recognize some of the obvious contributions made by former SMAs as well as some of the shared ones. Only three of the twelve former SMAs will be covered in small detail: William O. Woolridge, George W. Dunaway, and William G. Bainbridge. Other former SMAs will be mentioned and recognized very briefly for their efforts toward the end. The topic areas of reference for contributions made are the NCO Education System, uniform policies and changes, training, and NCO position structure.

William O. Woolridge was born August 12, 1922 in Shawnee, Oklahoma. In an interview he describes himself as the eighth of ten children and knew early on that he wanted to be a professional soldier. Woolridge grew up in hard times having to do without where hard work was the norm and the family came first. His hard life and strict childhood helped to build the character needed to adapt and flourish in the Army environment (interview 16 Sep 2005).

Nine out of sixteen of Woolridge's assignments were infantry units. On his second assignment in Iceland, Woolridge was attached to a British unit. He became extremely

impressed with the British Regimental Sergeants Major (RSM) and their roles. The British RSM was responsible for all training in the regiment and knew all training as well, if not better, than everyone else in the regiment. That enduring impression of the British RSM in Woolridge's mind later in life helped to form what our U.S. Army today knows as the Command Sergeant Major (CSM) ("Former Sergeants Major of the Army").

The NCO position structure, particularly that of the Sergeant Major and Command Sergeant Major, went through a reformation period during a time when low prestige of these senior positions was a major concern. One of Woolridge's most significant contributions during his tenure was the establishment of the Command Sergeant Major rank. Daniel Elder wrote "The Army took a tentative step toward giving additional recognition to unit Sergeants Major in 1965, when it proposed new insignia to better distinguish between Sergeants Major of a command and other E-9s, such as those in staff positions. According to the plan developed by the chief of Personnel Operations, staff Sergeants Major would continue to wear the insignia of Sergeants Major but would be redesignated 'Chief Master Sergeants.' The Sergeants Major of a command, on the other hand, were to receive a new insignia with a wreath around the star in the center of the Sergeants Major insignia" (13). Sergeants Major around the Army did not like the idea of returning to an E-8 title and enjoyed the prestige of their current title. By the end of Woolridge's tenure as SMA, the new CSM rank was established with the wreaths and he was the first to have the new rank pinned on after stepping out of the SMA position.

The most significant accomplishment for William Woolridge was the actual establishment of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army. Daniel Elder wrote "As the first person to hold the office, he faced the awkward and difficult challenges of establishing ground rules and setting precedents for future SMAs" (9). During Woolridge's tenure, he also created the first Command

Sergeants Major Conference. This was significant because it was the first time that all senior enlisted Soldiers came together to review Army policy concerning all enlisted matters. Daniel Elder wrote “From the sergeants major conferences in 1966 and 1967 came proposals to change virtually every area affecting enlisted Soldiers, especially specific recommendations to improve professionalism and career opportunities within the enlisted force” (12).

According to Elder, another significant accomplishment was the establishment of the CSM program, which highlighted the difference between SGM staff positions and CSM command positions. Also significant was the establishment of the NCO Candidate Course during the Vietnam War. High casualty rates and mandatory twelve-month rotation tours left a shortage of NCOs to lead troops into battle. A simple basic training course was lengthened and some combat infantry leader tactics added to create this course. The top performers were promoted to Sergeant (SGT) and sent to Vietnam to lead troops into battle. This was considered the best alternative to promoting a Private First Class (PFC) already in Vietnam and having him lead troops into battle (13).

George W. Dunaway was born July 24, 1922 in Richmond, Virginia. At age 17, he joined the National Guard and was assigned to an infantry regiment. A year later his unit was activated and he joined the Regular Army. Eleven assignments later, Dunaway was appointed as the second Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) (“Former Sergeants Major of the Army”).

Dunaway, like all other SMAs who followed him, took his new job very seriously and pushed hard to enhance the image of the NCO Corps. Daniel Elder wrote “To improve morale and enhance public perception of the Army, Dunaway changed the Army’s uniform policy. His recommendation that reserve component Soldiers be allowed to wear three-year service stripes reinforced the ‘one Army’ concept” (80). Another uniform policy that Dunaway changed was

the wear of the Pathfinder Badge. In order to earn the Pathfinder Badge, you must have already been airborne qualified. Department of the Army (DA) policy was that you could only wear the Pathfinder Badge and not the Parachutist Badge once you were Pathfinder qualified. Dunaway proposed, and it was approved, that both badges could be worn.

The fairness issue between NCO pay and officer pay has been a concern for many years. Dunaway recognized the hard work of Drill Instructors and worked hard to get DA to authorize extra pay while performing Drill Instructor duties. Daniel Elder wrote “After a hard battle, he also corrected another longstanding problem—the lack of additional pay for Drill Instructors...Dunaway’s persistence resulted in additional funding for Drill Instructor pay” (80).

Although SMA Woolridge succeeded in distinguishing the rank of a CSM from that of a SGM, there was still some confusion about the titles. Daniel Elder wrote “Dunaway continued Woolridge’s Command Sergeant Major program. This program essentially differentiated Sergeants Major who served as senior enlisted advisers to commanders, based on their own careers of extensive troop leadership experience, from Sergeants Major who advanced to the highest pay grade through administrative and technical fields with limited troop leadership experience. He also clarified the rank structure for senior NCOs. When SMA Woolridge started the Command Sergeant Major Program, the titles were confusing and the title of Staff Sergeant Major was not well received. Dunaway recommended that the titles be restricted to three—Sergeant Major of the Army, Command Sergeant Major, and Sergeant Major—and that all three be addressed as ‘Sergeant Major’” (80).

Daniel Elder wrote “When asked about what he considered his greatest accomplishment as SMA, Dunaway humbly pointed out that ‘nothing can be considered permanent, because any Chief of Staff can change virtually anything he desires. Probably the most permanent

improvements that I am proud of are initiatives that were introduced before my tenure, but which materialized or grew during or after my tenure.’ The two greatest are the Command Sergeant Major Program and the Sergeants Major Academy” (82).

William G. Bainbridge was born April 17, 1925 in Galesburg, Illinois. He was inducted into the Army in 1943. Bainbridge, like many other men from his era, grew up during hard times and strong family values. Hard work was a way of life and making ends meet was the norm. Once again these norms would prove to be a good source of character building for a man to leave his mark in the top enlisted position of the U.S. Army.

According to Elder, Bainbridge served his time on active duty from 1943 to 1945. During that time he earned the rank of Staff Sergeant (SSG) and had been a prisoner of war (POW) for about four months. He served in the Army Reserves for five years before being recalled to active duty in 1950 as a SSG. Bainbridge served in Vietnam, many CSM positions to include the first CSM of the Sergeants Major Academy, and ten assignments later was appointed as the fifth Sergeant Major of the Army (117).

During his tenure as SMA, Bainbridge emphasized the need to take care of Soldiers and their families. For example, Soldiers serving isolated tours away from their families didn’t have many of the amenities offered by a normal post. Daniel Elder wrote “SMA Bainbridge convinced the Army and Air Force Exchange System (AAFES) to bring good entertainment to hardship duty stations at no cost. Remembering his own experiences, Bainbridge was convinced that Army leaders ‘have to take care of the family. If you don’t, you’re going to lose a Soldier” (119).

One of Bainbridge’s proudest accomplishments was securing permanent funding for the Noncommissioned Officer Education System. This was a key element in the continued professional development of NCOs. Other important issues deal with the Army Policy Council

and the Army Uniform Board. Daniel Elder wrote “Next he valued his work on the Army Policy Council to which General Weyand appointed him. In keeping with the feeling that the duties of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army were best carried out by working with the appropriate action and staff officers, Bainbridge was instrumental in having senior NCOs placed on the General Staff. He served on the Army Uniform Board during his entire tenure and designed the insignia of rank for the Sergeant Major of the Army that was used until October 1994: two stars between three chevrons and three lower arcs” (119) Bainbridge also was the first SMA to serve a four-year tenure instead of the usual two years.

The following is a list of all former SMAs in chronological order: (1) William O. Woolridge, (2) George W. Dunaway, (3) Silas L. Copeland, (4) Leon L. Van Autreve, (5) William G. Bainbridge, (6) William A. Connelly, (7) Glen E. Morrell, (8) Julius W. Gates, (9) Richard A. Kidd, (10) Gene C. McKinney, (11) Robert E. Hall, and (12) Jack L. Tilley. Kenneth O. Preston is the current and thirteenth SMA (“Former Sergeants Major of the Army”).

The Sergeant Major of the Army position is quite prestigious and anyone who holds this position is worthy of mention. Therefore, the final paragraph of this essay will provide brief comments for the ten remaining SMAs on the above list not yet covered in chronological order. Silas L. Copeland dealt with some major frustrations during his tenure. After Vietnam, tremendous downsizing took place and Copeland dedicated himself to maintaining good order and discipline in an all-volunteer Army. He recommended that officers not be allowed to hold NCO positions just to finish the required active time for retirement (Elder 92). Leon Van Autreve’s most significant accomplishment was helping to reestablish the NCO chain of command and tightening the NCO standards and discipline (Elder 108). William A. Connelly used his recruiting experience and enforced quality of life issues and helped to attract high

quality men and women to reenlist (Elder 134). Glen E. Morrell enforced weight, physical training and drug abuse standards. He also pushed for better housing for recruiters and over seas Soldiers (Elder 146). Julius W. Gates helped develop the NCO Evaluation Report and was instrumental in making sure that airborne-qualified Soldiers of a Pathfinder Detachment received jump pay (Elder 157). Richard A. Kidd helped design the current insignia for the SMA position in which the stripes, stars and American eagle represents every enlisted rank in the Army. Kidd's wife also developed the Army Family Team Building Program (Elder 175). Gene C. McKinney proposed and got approved special duty assignment pay for CSMs where their rater, senior rater and reviewer are all general officers (Elder 186). Robert E. Hall began and enforced the start of the seven Army values program (Elder 201). Jack L. Tilley suggested and accomplished reducing the twenty-year requirement to attend the SGM Academy so that NCOs would receive training earlier in their careers (Elder 216). Kenneth O. Preston is the current SMA. With his impressive thirty-year career so far, just as his predecessors, he is certain to leave an impressive legacy in the top enlisted position of the United States Army.

Works Cited

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