

NCO HISTORY BRIEF

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Class 56 L01

SMA (RET) JACK L. TILLEY

SMA (RET) Tilley has been arguably one of the most influential Sergeant Major of the Army in history. He started his career as many of us did, by enlisting for a term to explore what the Army had to offer. SMA (RET) Tilley was born in Vancouver, Washington on 3 December 1948(Elder, Guillespie, Kelly, Hawkins, Pierce 120). He enjoyed a normal childhood in which his main goal was to enjoy life as much as possible. He was not a scholarly student and had average grades in school. He had no family history of military service and had no intentions to join after graduating high school. He enjoyed his summer, one day, Tilley and five of his friends decided they would join the Army. Only two followed through with the plan, so Tilley and his friend, Prentice (Barney) Boykin went and joined the Army in the summer of 1966. Tilley was not particularly interested in the job he would perform while in the Army so he agreed to be a tanker as long as he could “jump out of airplanes”. Both Tilley and his friend Barney went to basic training in FT. Lewis, Washington.

After completion of basic training, they went on a couple weeks of leave and then reported to FT. Knox, Kentucky for Advanced Individual Training as armored crewmen. They received training on the M48 tank and became proficient on its basic operations, at times Tilley wondered how much he would remember from AIT after completion.

Everyone in Tilley's class was aware of the war going on in Vietnam at the time, so they were making sure they learned as much as possible before deploying to Vietnam. Upon finishing AIT, Tilley went to FT. Benning, Georgia for airborne training.

When he completed airborne training, Tilley along with Boykin, went to Vietnam where they were assigned to the 173<sup>rd</sup> INF Brigade (Airborne) in Pleiku. After a couple of days, Tilley was sent to Camp Zion in the 1<sup>st</sup> INF Division, leaving his good friend Boykin behind. He was assigned to Troop A, 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in Phu Loi as an assistant gunner on an M113 armored cavalry vehicle (ACAV) where he manned the .50 caliber machine gun. Due to heavy losses in his platoon, including his platoon leader and platoon sergeant, he became the loader for A-25, one of his troops M48A3 tanks. One of the most important lessons he learned while in Vietnam was to pay attention to his NCOs' and to pay attention to detail, this two things ensured he stayed alive during his tour. Sadly, he had to escort his friend's body back home a couple of months into the war. During the TET offensive, his unit deployed to Saigon. During one of the missions on of the vehicles fell off an eight foot cliff and needed extraction. Tilley's section mobilized as part of a team to recover the vehicle. During the recovery effort, the plan failed and Tilley took the initiative and broke through a wall with his vehicle in order to successfully recover the vehicle while under hostile fire. He received the Bronze Star with the V device for his action on that day.

Tilley returned from Vietnam as a Specialist 5 and returned to Fort Benning, GA. When he reported to the replacement company he was told the unit he was being assigned to was full and he wouldn't be assigned to it, he was asked if he could sing and when he replied he could not he was assigned to become a drill sergeant. He went through a month

and a half of drill sergeant candidate duties and was promoted to Sergeant when he started his drill sergeant tour of duty. During his tour as a drill sergeant, he one of the few NCOs selected to participate in Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's Project 100,000 social experiment. He became the drill sergeant of the group when he lost a coin toss with a fellow drill sergeant. His platoons of Soldiers were young men with a third or fourth grade school education. It took him longer than normal to have them trained to standard but he believed they were just as smart as the rest of the other Soldiers they just did not have the opportunity to get educated. That was his most fulfilling duty during his tour as a drill sergeant. During his tour as a drill sergeant, he was promoted to Staff Sergeant and when he completed his tour he had decided to get out of the Army because he could not get along with his current commander.

He got out of the Army in 1969 and found jobs in Georgia and Washington, working in a paneling company and a chemical company respectively. Even though he was doing well in the civilian community, he missed the camaraderie of the Army and one day while on vacation decided to stop by FT. Lewis and watched some Soldiers train. This rekindled his interest in returning so he stopped by a recruiting office and became friends with one of the recruiters who called him to return to active duty as soon as the opportunity presented itself. During his time as a civilian, he had married his wife, Gloria and had children.

He returned to active duty in 1971 and went to FT. Polk, Louisiana where he once again worked as a drill sergeant and retained his previous rank of Staff Sergeant. Upon his return, he noticed what he perceived as a significant improvement in the quality of recruits during his absence from the service. In 1974, he moved to FT. Lewis in order to

be able to meet the special medical needs of his son. Tilley returned to the tank lines and for the next five years, he rose from tank commander to platoon sergeant. After completing his tour, he moved to FT. Knox to work as an instructor where he initially taught small arms qualifications, .50 caliber firing, map reading, and tank gunnery to AIT students. In 1980, he was responsible for conducting the Army's first-ever M1 Main Battle Tank Training course. He was heavily involved in the early process of preparing lessons plans and training devices for the M1 Battle Tank. He stated that going from the M60A1 series tank to the M1 was like "going from a Volkswagen to a Cadillac" (Elder, Gillespie, Kelly, Hawkins, Pierce 120). He was also instrumental in convincing the Armor leadership to do hands on training on gunnery, when they were heavily involved in the tank simulator training and were going away from actual hands on training.

After almost completing his first training cycle as the senior trainer for the One Station Unit Training (OSUT) for Army tankers, he was hand-picked to work as the company First Sergeant. Within a matter of days, the battalion commander reassigned him to the battalion operations sergeant position. This was the first time he worked in a battalion staff position; he encountered many challenges but learned quickly and grew from them. In 1984, he was promoted to Master Sergeant and was selected for First Sergeant duty in B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, the unit responsible for conducting OSUT training for M1 tank crews. During his tour, he noticed there was friction between the drill sergeants and the tank commanders. He decided to rotate the NCOs' after the cycles ended in order to expose them to both jobs, immediately after the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle was completed the friction went away.

In 1985, he became the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course (BNCOC) Chief at FT. Knox. During that time, he rewrote the Program of Instruction (POI) for M1 armor crewmen NCO Course. During his career, he wasn't afforded the opportunity to attend the newly created NCOES system because of his assignments and the relatively new time since its inception. Due to his well-rounded career and overall experience, he was selected to attend the United States Army Sergeant Major Academy as a Master Sergeant, which at that time was almost unheard of (Elder, Guillespie, Kelly, Hawkins, Pierce 120). He had no problems completing the six month course and moved to Korea as his follow on assignment. When he arrived to Korea and was in-processing, he was offered a job as the replacement first sergeant. He was extremely excited because he could stay in Seoul, but that job quickly disappeared once he turned the corner during his tour and the replacement Sergeant Major saw his name and told him he was already asked for, and needed to report to Camp Casey. Tilley reported to 1<sup>st</sup> BN, 72<sup>nd</sup> Armor where he became the C Company 1SG. He inherited a company in which the previous 1SG was fired for incompetence, and the company was at the bottom of the pile. Tilley quickly went to work and turned the company around from the worst in the battalion to the best during his tenure.

He returned to FT. Knox as a chief instructor until his selection to CSM in 1988. He was assigned to 1<sup>st</sup> BN, 10<sup>th</sup> CAV, 194<sup>th</sup> Separate Armored Brigade. During his 1 ½ years as the CSM for the unit, Tilley made it a point to be exposed to his Soldiers and could be found on weekends around the barracks visiting and talking to his Soldiers. He became the 194<sup>th</sup> Brigade CSM and found himself in charge of over 6,000 Soldiers for over two years.

With the Army reshaping, the 194<sup>th</sup> was inactivated and CSM Tilley became the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division CSM in Germany. He served as the division CSM for over five years and deployed the division to Bosnia in support of NATO as an Implementation Force (IFOR). During his tour in Bosnia CSM Tilley did what he did best, talk to the Soldiers and listen to their concerns, he was concerned that because they knew it was a one year tour the Soldiers would get complacent.

After returning to Germany CSM Tilley planned to return to FT. Knox, work as a BN CSM for his last 18 months and then retire. CSM Tilley decided to put his name in for nomination for the Space and Missile Defense Command CSM position after a friend edged him on to try, he was ultimately selected. He went from a unit of about 18,000 Soldiers to 1,200 Soldiers and 1,500 civilians, whom he considered as Soldiers too. While serving as the SMDC CSM he was involved in a conference sponsored by the USASMA on the future development of the NCO Professional Development and the start of the "Future NCO Vision" was born. After only five months as the SMDC CSM, he became the Central Command (CENTCOM) CSM, where he would head service members from all branches of service on a real world mission. Like he had done throughout his career, CSM Tilley did what he knew best, taking care of service members and talking to them constantly to ensure he knew what was happening around him at all times. He felt that all enlisted members had the same needs regardless of which service they served in.

In late 1999, CSM Tilley was nominated to the SMA position with 12 other CSM's. After completing the interview process, he returned to Tampa, Florida. He was playing golf when he received a call from SMA Hall stating he needed to return to

Washington to interview with the Secretary of the Army because he was the one selected for the job. On 23 June 2000, Jack L. Tilley became the 12<sup>th</sup> Sergeant major of the Army. From the beginning of his term, SMA Tilley set out to try to communicate to as many Soldiers as possible and ensure he gave them 110% effort. He was involved in the transformation process directed by then Chief of Staff of the Army, General Eric Shinseki to make the Army more mobile and quicker responsive. He was also involved in the Army transforming their traditional headgear, the patrol caps, to the black berets. He directed the first ever Nominative Command Sergeant Major Conference conducted at FT. Bliss, Texas in which he gathered critical information from the “field” on what issues needed to be addressed and what type of reform needed to be implemented. He also spearheaded the change to allow more nonpromotable Master Sergeants into the Sergeants Major Academy. He believed that NCOs’ needed to start getting that type of education earlier in their careers in order to be prepared for the changing Army. He also introduced a significant and very welcomed pay increase for Soldiers and testified before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel on 2002 to let them know there was still room for “improvement in future funding”. In less than three years, SMA Tilley traveled more than 500,000 miles to 200 CONUS and OCONUS installations and visited approximately 200,000 Soldiers. Before retiring SMA Tilley said “ I don’t feel I stand out...I am just a Soldier getting a job done. I am no different than anybody else, I just have a different job.”

SMA (RET) Tilley was one of the most successful Sergeant Major of the Army. During his brief tenure as the 12<sup>th</sup> SMA, he implemented many changes that greatly enhanced the opportunities for career advancement for Soldiers. His always taking care

of Soldiers first approach to his job was extremely effective and allowed him to be able to make all the changes he affected during his tenure. He was a Soldier first and the SMA second.

#### References

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