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The Back Bone of the Army

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Abstract

Throughout the years the noncommissioned officer corps has taken an important role in the history of the Army. From once having a limited role to presently having the first senior enlisted advisor to the Chairmen of the Joint Chief of Staff. The US Army Noncommissioned Officer Corps has proven to be the backbone of the army and has demonstrated to have the most technically and tactically professional NCOs any nation can offer.

The Back Bone of the Army

Throughout the centuries the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) has proven to be the back bone of the army. NCOs are now major contributors of the decision making process and play a major role in today's Army. Noncommissioned Officers are now in positions of greater responsibility than they have ever been throughout the history of the Army. From the early days of the American Revolution, the NCO had little to no responsibilities. In the present, the commander relies on his NCO before making his decision. Changes in tactics, technology and the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) have lead to the empowerment of the NCO.

If we look back in history and compare the role of the NCO, we are able to notice the transformation that the NCO corps has gone through. A good example of this would be the Civil War.

During the Civil War, noncommissioned officers led the lines of skirmishers which preceded and followed each major unit. Noncommissioned officers also carried the flags and regimental colors of their units. This deadly task was crucial to maintain regimental alignment and in order for commanders to define the location of their units on the field. As the war progressed, organizational and tactical changes led the Army to employ more open battle formations. These changes further enhanced the combat leadership role of the noncommissioned officer. (Fisher, 1976)

However if you compare the NCO role of the British Army, Continental Army and the Colonial Militia you will see the similarity. The NCO role in the British Army had very strict limitations. The battle field didn't give them much independence either. Their job was basically to browbeat the Soldiers to stand fast in the line of battle despite horrific casualties. In the

Colonial Militia the NCOs enjoyed more opportunities to show initiative compare to their British counterpart. They were formed in Anglo Saxon tradition where every free, able bodied adult male was expected to own arms and to be a part of the militia company of their local community. In the Continental Army initially, the NCO had only a little more status than the private they were supervising. During the start of the American Revolution the role of the NCO was not established. It was during 1778 that the Inspector General Friedrich von Steuben established the duties and roles of the NCO in his “Regulation for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States” (printed in 1779). This regulation also known as the Blue Book and is currently FM 3-21.5 Drill and Ceremony, was the Army first field manual.

The establishment of the role of the NCO, aided in the evolution of the NCO, as an important integral part of today Army success; no longer was an NCO just a care taker or enforcer of standards and discipline, but he also contributed to the decision making as well. NCOs did all the training and mentoring and advised the commander on all enlisted manners. This created a bond between the commander and his right hand man the First Sergeant or the Sergeant Major. With this empowerment, the NCO corps had a voice on how things were done in the Army and could look out in the best interest of his Soldiers.

The evolving role of the NCO opened doors of opportunities and dependability which established a need for education and positions of higher authority. In 1971 the Army established the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) in an effort to provide the Noncommissioned Officer with the skills and training needed to lead his men. They tried to mirror the training in some extent to the training the officers were receiving. With the NCOES now established we were able to train Soldiers at four different levels; PLDC, BNCOC, ANCO, and the Sergeants Major Academy.

The first level of NCOES training was the junior NCO level. This was composed of the Primary Leadership Development Course PLDC which gave junior Soldiers the initial foundation of becoming an NCO. The second level was your midlevel NCO training the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course (BNCOC) that provides basic leadership skills at squad and team levels. At the third level you were considered a senior NCO, and you attended the Advance Noncommissioned Officer Course (ANCOC) which specializes on advance technical skills a leader should have. Your last level includes the Sergeants Major Academy which molded senior NCOs to be future Sergeants Major and Command Sergeants Major at battalions and higher echelons. During the senior level stage there were additional non NCOES schools that you could attend to further enhance your knowledge and education as a noncommissioned officer. Some of these courses were the First Sergeant Course, the Operation Intelligence Course and the Personnel and Logistics Course. (USASMA 1986)

The NCOs today possesses a broad spectrum of knowledge and reliability. These qualities and training have been a major contributing factor to the NCO empowerment to positions of higher responsibilities almost equal or higher of his fellow officers. A perfect example of this is Army Command Sergeant Major, William J. Gainey, Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Joint Chiefs Chairman. This position is one that no NCO would had ever dreamed of if we were still stuck in the civil war ages. This position alone demonstrates the level of NCOs that our Army now posses and the trust that our leaders have on the NCO Corps. The American NCOs are now and have always been and will always be in positions of greater authority and responsibility when compared to that of any nation. From once having a position of a care taker with no involvement or contribution to the decision making process to the present empowerment of almost being equal to his counterpart, the commissioned officer.

Conclusion

As a nation at war, NCOs now more than ever have proven to be the Back Bone of the Army. From setting the example in everything they do to having the most Medal of Honor recipients than any corps could imagine. The NCO was once considered the step child of the Army the working blue collar. Officers were considered the white collar workers with the college education and their well-spoken abilities. However, now some NCOs possess more education than their commanders and have better communication skills than some general officers. Not only are we better educated but have more experience as we go through the ranks compared to the officers. As a 2LT takes his first platoon his platoon sergeant has eight to ten years of experience in the Army, and will help to mold this young officer to be a leader. As a First Sergeant you have close to twenty years of Army and are now molding this young CPT to be a company commander. If we were a tribe, we would be considered the senior counsel of that tribe, the people you would come to if you needed guidance. Experience, combined with better education, has led this nation to possess the most powerful and adaptive Army and NCOs corps in the world.

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