

The Three Most Important Factors That Led to the Empowerment of the American
Noncommissioned Officer

SGM Brad M. Ware

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class 35

SGM Faithette Foreman

11 August 2009

Abstract

The role of the noncommissioned officer has changed many times during our wonderful history. From the early days as drummers and fifers, to the well educated and trained professional soldier of today, we have witnessed the evolution of the noncommissioned officer corp. We will examine the main factors in that evolution today. The advancement of weapon technology, the United States entrance into World War I and II, and professional development have played a major role in the empowerment of the American NCO.

The Three Most Important Factors That Led to the Empowerment of the American Noncommissioned Officer

In Colonial America the first NCO Corps were very similar to that of their European allies. The military forces they formed were strongly influenced by their continuing allegiance with England and its traditions. The difference between the Continental European Army and the new American Army was the Colonial Militia. Every able bodied man was expected to be a part of his local militia company. These companies proved to be very useful in the various skirmishes that led up to the Revolutionary War. In 1775, the Continental Army was formed and started preparing for the upcoming War of Independence.

While the NCO outranked the corporal and private, it wasn't by much. He possessed a status a little better than the privates he was supervising. The pay of the private, the corporal, and the NCO were almost equivalent. "The Army deducted from their pay a portion for their clothing; the soldier was expected to obtain his own arms and blankets" (The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, 2007, p.24). Each infantry company had a drummer and a fife major that was responsible for signal functions in battle. The fifer and the drummer were classified as NCOs. Our illustrious beginnings as Non Commissioned Officers started with the pay barely above a private, a condition that was not solved until after World War II, and the status of a company musician.

Throughout the Revolutionary War and continuing to the Civil War the Noncommissioned Officer evolved somewhat slowly. He did become the caretaker of soldiers and responsible for their discipline. Linear tactics that dominated battlefield philosophy regulated the NCO to maintaining "the line" during conflicts. The NCO's

primary responsibility was to “keep the long ranks steady to maintain volley-fire discipline.” (The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, 2007, p.25) Between wars; pay, education, and the status of the NCO improved very little. Very often enlisted men were viewed as the individuals too lazy or too stupid to take advantage of the opportunities elsewhere. These early patriots were truly tested beyond belief, often enduring unsanitary living conditions and forced to eat food barely edible. Although they experienced horrendous conditions and held a low status, they were critical in forming the Army of a new nation.

Weapons Technology

The first empowerment of the NCO was the advancement of weapons. During the period before the Revolutionary War, the various conflicts immediately after, and up to the Civil War the infantry soldier fired a smooth bore musket. With the invention of the rifled barrel musket the role of the NCO was about to change. Linear tactics proved to be costly with a new and more accurate weapon. Volley-fire and suppressive fire that dominated the battlefield at close range, was being replaced with accurate fire at longer ranges. Instead of firing at the man, the rifleman was aiming at the button on his shirt. Casualties starting rising and tactics had to change. The changing role of the NCO was documented in a new manual by Bvt. Maj Gen Emory Upton. “ His *TACTICS*, adopted as Army Doctrine in 1867, placed greater emphasis on simplicity of maneuver” (The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, 2007, p.29).

Even deadlier weapons entered the battlefield before the end of the war. With the emergence of breech-loading rifles, carbines, and the Gatling Gun; the NCO became a small group leader, leading men into combat, and emerging as an important part of the

battlefield. After the war a technological revolution continued to sweep over all armies. It supplied the infantry and artillery with weapons of ever increasing deadliness, emphasizing and expanding the role of small unit leaders.

As the 19th century ended the United States gained in size and in power. Our borders spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific and our economic interests kept broadening our horizons. As always, with new horizons come new conflicts. The American NCO faced battle on foreign ground in conflicts ranging from Cuba, the Philippines, China and Puerto Rico. Our forces became well trained in fighting various types of enemies and military strategy as well as being well trained in combat support. With the battlefield located in different countries, logistics became a major concern and problem. Mobilizing and deploying thousands of troops to a foreign land proved to be a difficult task but became an invaluable lesson. They did not know it at the time but all combat of the future would be outside of the lower 48 states.

The Noncommissioned Officer of the 20th century was well versed in combat tactics, logistics and soldier support. From deployment to combat, our forces were becoming very experienced in the art of war. Even sanitation and disease fighting became a part of the NCO Corps training and responsibility. “The painful experience with tropical disease in Cuba led the Medical Department to investigate the transmission of typhoid and yellow fever. A healthier Army was the result and never again did the Army as a whole suffer such losses from disease.” (The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, 2007, p. 33). The NCO was becoming more and more vital with every skirmish and every conflict. This training and experience would prove to be very useful. In the years to come, he would need everything history could provide to teach and prepare him

for two world wars.

World War

The second factor that led to the empowerment of the NCO was World War. On the soils of the Western Front, the noncommissioned officer proved his skills as a technician and leader on the battlefield. Many officers were killed in combat. The Army, as it had done in previous wars, recognized that the most logical replacements were already in the ranks. Battlefield commissions became common place. Many junior officers fell as well and the able bodied NCO proved valuable in replacing the missing void of leadership in combat.

Trench warfare defined World War 1. “During WWI, the machine gun became the main battlefield weapon. Its fire power and range made it difficult for troops to move easily to new positions. Artillery fire also affected the ability to maneuver. Trenches were dug along the battlefield fronts” (Bull, 1998, Trench Warfare, p. 1) Many types of trenches were used to accommodate the mission. Firing trenches, cover trenches, supply trenches, and communication trenches were the most common. Although our forces and opposing forces were dug into the ground, casualties were high. Soon the Army was seeing shortages in all personnel, NCOs included. To fill this void, the Army had to train replacements. The new NCO had little combat experience and at first this caused problems on the battlefield. New training measures were instituted. During the last months of war, our NCOs proved their worth and value. Gen G.B. Duncan, the commander of the 82nd Airborne Force wrote: “It often happens that a sergeant or even a corporal may decide a battle by the boldness with which he seizes a bit of ground and holds it.” (The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, 2007, Pg 37) Many

lessons were learned. High casualties in certain battles caused the avoidance of mass formations and employment of an already tested strategy, small-unit tactics. Small unit tactics needed small unit leaders, the noncommissioned officer.

World War II would again prove no military could function effectively without the NCO. This war would place more responsibility and demand on the NCO than any other conflict in history. In 1940, President Roosevelt instituted the Selective Service and the military changed forever. “The Army’s rapid expansion from its small peacetime size to over 7 million men and women placed a special burden on the NCOs.” (Time Honored Professionals: The NCO Corp Since 1775, 1989, p. 2). The normal infantry squad was reorganized to include twelve men instead of eight and included two NCOs instead of one. Shortages of NCOs were filled with the very young and inexperienced, but it was considered generally successful. The small group leader in the infantry regiments and ranger battalions became critical as the war progressed.

Most of the critical need for the NCO was in combat but with the advancement of technology, again the NCO stepped in to fill the void. With new weapons, machinery, vehicles, and communication devices there became a great need for special skilled workers. Administration and other combat support elements, such as supply and mess, saw the increased need for the functions of the noncommissioned officer. Leadership in all of these areas were needed and a lot of that responsibility fell on the NCO.

By the end of World War II, the Army had more NCOs than ever before. No longer was he considered a low-level soldier, now he was a professional. No longer was he just an enlisted man that shared the barracks with troops, now he was a career soldier living with his family. The NCO came a long way from being a fifer or a drummer and evolved

into highly trained, combat and combat support professional. The Army instituted some training programs for their new NCO, but peace was short lived, and in 1950 in Korea, we were at war again.

Professional Development

The third factor that led to the empowerment of the NCO was professional development. As stated previously in this research paper, the lives of the noncommissioned officers varied very little from his subordinates. He often endured horrible conditions, unsanitary living quarters, and barley edible food. "Pay was a major problem for many years and varied very little from the pay of privates." (Time Honored Professionals: The NCO Corp Since 1775, 1989, p. 4). As America grew and the NCO saw much combat, it is unfortunate that his benefits did not equal his service. It was not until the end of World War II that the enlisted pay system was put into law not to be reduced again. The NCO was entitled to more than his subordinates and it has increased ever since. Today, the pay and benefits of the noncommissioned officer is becoming equivalent with his civilian counterparts and looking at our predecessors, something to be thankful for.

Another aspect in professional development is the evolution of education and training. As the demand, responsibility, and impact of the NCO increased so did the need for training. Advancements of technology in all aspects of mission accomplishment also increased the need for education and training. As the US Armed Services grew in size, capability, function, and form our NCO Corps became the backbone of its service. We had to be developed.

The forms of development changed many times in our 300 year history. From the

early manuals of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, to the institutional training after World War II, the US military continued to try to educate and train the NCO. It was not until after the Vietnam War that a modern system was introduced and still used today. The NCO Education System (NCOES) offers professional development of our NCO Corps and is vital for education and training. It is a five-level system that progresses through the ranks beginning with the E-5 attending WLC, an E-6 attending BNCOC, an E-7 attending ANCOC, a 1SG attending the 1SG Course, and ending with an E-9 attending the SGM Academy.

Counter Arguments

The role of the NCO has changed and evolved many different ways throughout history. Some would argue that there are different factors that led to the empowerment of the noncommissioned officer. As their role increased, the NCOs had a greater scope of responsibility, therefore, increasing their numbers in the ranks, influence on subordinates, and value to the organization. This increase in scope of responsibility was an enormous factor in the implementation of the NCO systems that we have today such as the EPMS, the enlisted personnel management system; the NCOES, the Non Commissioned Officer Education System; and the NCOEDP, the Non Commissioned Officer Professional Development system. These systems enabled the NCOs of the 20th and 21st century to develop a better personnel management system that enhanced the careers of all enlisted personnel. As managers, the NCO became the mentor and role model of his subordinates. What an evolution from a drummer or fifer.

These factors truly empowered the NCO but without the changes in weapon technology in the early stages of our history, the infantry squad would have never gotten

“off the line”. The changes in linear tactics was the first step in increasing the responsibility of the NCO. With the onset of World War, the value of the NCO was increased and by the end of World War II, we were the backbone of the Army. With the increased number of NCOs throughout the military, professional development played a key role in solidifying the NCO as a leader of soldiers.

Conclusion

Today’s NCO is a professional, respected by officers and enlisted men, soldier and civilian. Well trained, highly motivated, and inspiring, he is the backbone of the Army. Through time, war, and change he has stood tall as a leader, trainer, and guardian of standards. He is a role model. He is well prepared and will always meet the challenge. The United States Army has developed its NCO Corp. I am proud to be included in its ranks.

References

- The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps, the Backbone of the Army. (2007). Center of Military History (Revised Edition).
- Bull, S. (1998). Trench Warfare. Military History, retrieved November 11, 2008
- Time Honored Professionals: The NCO Corp Since 1775. (1989). Center of Military History, United States Army.