

U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy

Non-Resident Course (Class 35)

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Argumentative Essay

Topic: Evolving Role of the Non-Commissioned Officer

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The Noncommissioned Officer Corps (NCO's) has seen a significant shift in responsibility and empowerment over the last 200 years. Selection of early NCO's were not due to overall performance or potential as much as it was to their large physical size, their booming voice, and the ability to speak clear English. A professional system that evaluates the Soldier through performance and potential compared to their peers throughout the U.S. Army is the system used for selection of today's NCO's. The quality of current NCO's serving in the U.S. Army has significantly improved over the last 200 years and so have their responsibilities and their ever-increasing empowerment. The responsibilities and empowerment of the NCO will continue to increase and evolve due to the broad range of military operations in the years to come.

Many factors have led to the ever-increasing responsibilities and empowerment of the NCO over time. Pay, benefits, civilian education, experience, formal professional development, advances in technology requiring decentralization of decision-making authority, and changes in tactics are some of the major factors of this discussion. These factors are just some of the reasons that the NCO Corps has assumed more responsibility and helped empower the NCO over the last 200 years.

According to studies of military pay, civilian counterparts with the same level of civilian education receive a higher level of pay compared to our Soldiers. While this may be true from the study group's research in regards to base pay, what it does not take into consideration is the additional military benefits (medical/dental/etc.) or the reasons why our Soldier's now have a higher level of civilian education. The difference between a married Sergeant in 1970 and 2007 is over \$39,000.00. This is a significant increase in military pay for the NCO over the last 40 years. The NCO averaged an

annual cost of living increase of 5.4% per year compared to the civilian sector, which saw an average cost of living increase of 4.4% per year. One percent does not seem like much until we compound it over 40 years resulting in an annual income difference of over \$14,000 less per year for the civilian compared to the NCO's income in 2009.

Financial compensation for the sacrifices our NCO's make on a daily basis are impossible, however, the benefit increases over the years has enabled the U.S. Army to retain a great percentage of its experienced and combat proven NCO's. Some of the major improvements have included the establishment of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the ever increasing education benefits (VEAP, Montgomery G.I. Bill, Tuition Assistance, etc.), VA guaranteed home loans, dental/medical coverage for all military personnel (Active Duty and Reservists) and their families, and increased life insurance benefits. We have all heard the challenges that some Soldiers have had to deal with in regards to medical care at both military and VA health facilities. Although these valid issues could adversely affect the quality of our force, both our military and civilian leaders work aggressively to resolve them.

TRADOC SGM David M. Bruner stated "The side that has the smartest Soldiers.....is the side that wins the war". There is a lot of truth to that statement in that both civilian and military education expands the intellectual capabilities of our NCO Corps. The significant improvements in military educational benefits has allowed all service members the opportunity to pursue higher education resulting in the most educated enlisted force in the U.S. Army's history. In addition, the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) was created in 1971 to educate NCO's on subjects and skills needed to enhance their performance, abilities, and leadership skills at each

NCO level from Sergeant to Sergeant Major (“Year of NCO” 2009). Several changes over the last four years have occurred to the NCOES to better prepare Soldiers for the asymmetrical warfare and lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan (“Year of the NCO” 2009). The increase in civilian education and the establishment of formal military education has allowed our NCO Corps to shoulder much more responsibility over our peers from previous years.

In addition to NCOES, the Noncommissioned Officer Development Program (NCODP) complements NCOES and the CSM or Senior NCO in each organization manages the programs. NCODP allows the CSM to gear training toward battle focused NCO development in support of the unit’s Mission Essential Task List (METL). This allows the unit to continue to develop their NCO’s into confident and competent leaders capable of accomplishing their wartime mission. While most units have well planned and executed NCODP some are marginally accomplished. Any training within an organization marginally accomplished may ultimately result in a less prepared organization that may fall short of accomplishing its goals. My experience over the years is that those units with marginally executed training will eventually see the most senior NCO’s of that unit pushed to separation/retirement by the motivated, dedicated, and more experienced NCO’s. This naturally occurring event occurs in any successful organization.

One of the most effective programs in selecting our future leaders has been the establishment and changes made in the Enlisted Promotion Management System (EPMS). The EPMS consists of a minimum qualification for the next grade followed by a points based system that evaluates administrative areas (civilian education, military

education, awards, weapon qualification, etc.), performance, and potential. Although the system still has some disadvantages, it is still the best tool used in selecting our enlisted Soldiers for the next promotion. In the past, some units promoted based upon established relationships with senior leaders. Although some could argue that this is still the case in some situations, the majority would agree that our current promotion system has significantly reduced the good old boy promotion policies of previous years.

Over the last four years, several military publications have reported on the separation of experienced and educated NCO's from the U.S. Army to pursue other careers that pay more and require less time away from their families. While this is definitely accurate information due to the OPTEMPO of today's NCO it is still only a small fraction of the NCO Corps. In addition, the small percentage of NCO separations will allow our junior NCOs to continue to progress in rank and responsibility. During 2008 and 2009 all components of our U.S. Army has been very successful at reenlisting both first term and careerist Soldiers and will continue to do so as we move forward in enhancing its NCO Corps.

Lethality on the modern battlefield has caused tactics to become more decentralized and have involved dispersed operations (changes in tactics). Modern military technology forced the decision-making authority to push to lower levels. Over the last 20 years, the NCO Corps was much more responsible for the decision-making decisions due to the decentralization. This empowerment and responsibility is a direct result of improved pay, benefits, civilian education, formal and informal military education, and changes in the enlisted promotion system.

The naysayers believe that a shortage crisis within the NCO Corps (similar to the

Vietnam War) will result due to the current OPTEMPO. They believe that our experienced NCO's will continue to leave the Army due to the multiple deployments and the effects on their families. Whereas, most of us currently serving believe the U. S. Army has learned from previous events and implemented many benefit incentives to sustain the NCO Corps. Changes in all levels of education (military and civilian) and the promotion selection process will continue to evolve and improve due to the results of lessons learned. Junior NCO's that are selected for promotion will have outstanding real world experiences due to their participation in GWOT operations and will be much better prepared to perform their duties of the next pay grade.

Today's NCOs are accomplished military professionals who have combined civilian and military educational opportunities to become the Army's preeminent body of leadership ("Year of the NCO" 2009). The United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Corps is the "backbone of the American Army" and our enemies continue to fear them.

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